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Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District Oral History Series

Frank A. Johnson

BUS DOCTOR: FROM MECHANIC TO MAINTENANCE MANAGER AT THE
ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT

Interviews conducted by
Laura McCreery
in 2001

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Frank A. Johnson, "Bus Doctor: From Mechanic to Maintenance Manager at the Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District," an oral history conducted in 2001 by Laura McCreery, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2003.



Frank A. Johnson, 1985
Photograph courtesy of AC Transit

Cataloging information

JOHNSON, Frank A. (b. 1926)

Bus Maintenance Manager,
Mechanic

Bus Doctor: From Mechanic to Maintenance Manager at the Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District, ii, 78 pp., 2003

Childhood in Oakland, California; first job as a mechanic with Key System, 1942; Navy service during WWII; returning to Key System, 1947; transition from Key System to AC Transit, 1960; general manager, Al Bingham; the bus fleet; changes to hiring practices for mechanics; promotions to foreman and maintenance superintendent, 1970s; early role as shop steward; thoughts on the union; promotion to maintenance manager, 1983; reorganization of maintenance, 1985; starting a technical services unit; view of AC Transit's general managers; BART changes Bay Area public transit; using computers in technical services; management philosophy; sailing hobby; thoughts on diversity and affirmative action; retirement, 1999.

Interviewed in 2001 by Laura McCreery for the Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District Oral History Series, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name FRANK A. JOHNSON
Date of birth Dec 3, 1926 Birthplace Oakland, Calif.
Father's full name OTTO CARL JOHNSON
Occupation Street Car Train Operator Birthplace Sweden
Mother's full name MINNIE CARLINE JOHNSON
Occupation Home Maker Birthplace Sweden
Your spouse/partner Betty H. Johnson
Occupation NA Birthplace Philadelphia PA.
Your children Louis Johnson
Margaret Johnson (Staub)
Where did you grow up? Oakland California
Present community Castro Valley Calif.
Education Oakland High School
Iowa St. College (Navy-Diesels) Chabot College (Mgmt.)
Occupation(s) Mechanic, Heavy Duty
Trans. Maintenance Mgmt.
Areas of expertise Mechanic

Other interests or activities Sailing

Organizations in which you are active WWII Submarine Veterans,
Spinnaker Yacht Club, San Leandro.
SIGNATURE Frank A. Johnson DATE: June 25, 2001

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INTERVIEW WITH FRANK A. JOHNSON

I. YOUTH IN CALIFORNIA; EARLY YEARS WITH KEY SYSTEM AND AC TRANSIT

[Interview 1: June 25, 2001]##¹

Childhood, Schooling, Family; First Job With Key System

McCreery: Let's start this morning by just having you state your date of birth and then tell me a little bit about where you were born.

Johnson: I was born right here in Oakland, California, [at what] is now the Kaiser Hospital on MacArthur Boulevard--it was called Fabiola then--December 3, 1926. My father was an immigrant from Sweden, and he had taken on a job as motorman and conductor for the old, original Key System, and so we lived all our life listening to transportation, transportation woes, what happens and what doesn't happen about public transit and public service.

When World War II broke out, I was still going to high school, and in November of '42 I went to work for the then-Key System as part of the work-school program. I was still in high school. You went to high school for four hours, and you went to work for four hours. But they were still short of help, so you used to average about eight hours a day working and four hours in school. This worked out fine.

McCreery: Now, just back up a little and tell me, do you know how your father got into his line of work?

¹## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Johnson: It was the only job. It was a job that was offered. He had put applications in many, many places, and this was one that was offered, the first good offer he had, so he just took it and took the training, and he successfully operated streetcars. He had a very good safety record for something like thirty years before he retired.

McCreery: Did he talk to you much about his work?

Johnson: Oh, yes. He would talk about the people he would meet, and that's basically what public transit is. That's the hardest part, is dealing with the people. Sometimes it's nice, and sometimes it's not so nice. That's what he would talk about.

McCreery: What part of Oakland did you grow up in?

Johnson: East Oakland, Eighth Avenue and East Twenty-fourth. Oakland was a beautiful town to grow up in. It had absolutely no problems, believe it or not. It was integrated then, without problems. High school was integrated, with no problems, and it wasn't until World War II when issues exploded.

McCreery: Yes. Tell me what high school you went to.

Johnson: Oakland High School, Park Boulevard and MacArthur Boulevard. It was Hopkins then, I think. It had a different name. It was a good school. The Oakland school district was tremendous in that era. There were eight basic schools in the Oakland area. If you wanted to be a mechanic, you would transfer to Tech High [Oakland Technical High School]. If you were college bound, you could either stay at Oakland High, which had a high academic level, or go to University High School. Berkeley High School was a step above us academically, but they never could play football!

Each school had a specialty, if you will, at and above. People would move about to try and attain a trade. They had a huge print shop at Oakland High. We had a huge metal shop, a huge wood shop, to encourage people to learn how to work with their hands as well as their brains. I think some of that's lacking today, but that's my own opinion.

McCreery: Now, how early did you start your own interest in fixing things and so on?

Johnson: I think I was born with that. I've been fixing things, or fixing cars, if you will--when you went to high school, you were fixing your own cars. You had to keep them running, and these were Model A Fords of that era. If you wanted to get a date, you had a car that was

running and working correctly, maybe! [laughter] So you got to fixing things, and it went from there.

I was very fortunate. I didn't work that long, actually, with the Key System initially, and then I went into the navy in August of '43, and I was lucky. I went to Iowa State College in Ames, Iowa, for diesel school. And so we had the diesel school back there for ten, twelve weeks, and then I went to New London, Connecticut, for submarine school. We had the submarine diesels up there. It was another ten weeks. And after that, they shipped us overseas.

So we were in a continual training mode with the diesel engines, and we worked on engine overhaul there at Pearl Harbor for about six months, eight months, before I went on a ship, the *USS Kingfish*. Ships would come in for refit; you would work on them and work yourself aboard a ship and go to sea.

So that was my basic experience with the diesel engines. When the war ended, I came out and went back to work with Key System. I was back on the streetcars, and the streetcars, of course, were pulled off the tracks. I went down to the trains, and when the trains went off, I went back up into--they call it the rubber. The buses were with tires, so I went to work there with the diesel engines. It worked out easily, and you could work right into it.

McCreery: Now, you said you were with Key System for a time before the war. I wonder if you could just tell me a little bit more. You mentioned the four hours school, four hours work. How many people were doing that then, and how was that whole program set up?

Johnson: I don't know who set the program up. It was a combination of the school and industry. People would go to work at an accredited place. They could work at Key System. Southern Pacific offered jobs down there at the trains also. That's the only two I knew of. Others were working everywhere. Everybody went to work during the war. It was just an accepted way of life.

McCreery: What were you actually doing at Key System in that very first job?

Johnson: The very first job, they started us off--they gave us a title of cleaner, but we weren't really cleaning because we started right off by learning to operate the streetcars, to switch them, to park them where they should be in logical order, and then we would bring in odd numbers or even numbers every night and adjust the brakes on them. So we

were adjusting brakes from the get-go. At that time, the brakes didn't have automatic adjusters or anything else. They had to be adjusted every other day, so that's sometimes why we worked the extra hours, was to get the brakes all adjusted.

McCreery: Now, who taught you all this?

Johnson: Oh, somebody would come along and show you what should be done, and then you would just go ahead and do it.

McCreery: But was there an apprentice program? How were the youngsters brought into the work?

Johnson: No. You just come in and go to work. Just come in and start.

McCreery: Trial by fire.

Johnson: Yes. And you do it as you go, and you learn fast. You learn fast. But here again, tools were not foreign to us to begin with. We were not complete novices with tools. We had fooled with the cars enough, and after working on cars, streetcars were simple, really quite basic, quite elementary. [laughter]

McCreery: Why is that?

Johnson: I don't know, because they were designed in the 1800s and they're all very simple. That was all. There was nothing automated about them or anything else. You knew what to watch for and what not to watch for. You didn't touch the electrical wires if you wanted to live, and just used your own brains about it.

McCreery: How old were you when you first went to work for Key System?

Johnson: I guess I had to be fifteen.

McCreery: Really!

Johnson: Yes. So I went in the navy at sixteen. I lied again. I was big for my age. I've always been tall, always been big. It's just what you did. And I was not alone. Many, many others were doing it to get in the military and what have you. I think the average age aboard my ship was nineteen. That included a lot of officers who were in their thirties, so the average was cut way back down.

McCreery: I do want to talk about that some more. Now, you mentioned, though, the tools that you were learning to use before you went into the war, at the Key System, and I wonder, where did they get all the tools for fixing at that point?

Johnson: You mean the streetcars? You couldn't buy the tools. These were all made in our own blacksmith shop, which was in Emeryville at the time. All the tools were fashioned that way. The average brake-adjusting tool was three inches wide to break open these--it was more brawn than brains to work these things. We had jacks that we would jack the streetcars up with, to grease the turntables, if you will. The trucks on the streetcars would have to be able to turn. There wasn't that many tools.

We used to have little stupid screwdrivers that we would [use to] take the molding out to change the windows. Every night you had so many windows that were cracked, broken by people throwing things at you. They were mad because they missed the streetcar. [laughter] So changed the windows and put these things back in and get the vehicle ready for tomorrow. That's all. And sweep it if you had to. Who cares?

McCreery: Do you remember how much they paid you at the very first job?

Johnson: Seventy-five cents [an hour], seventy-five cents, yes. And it went to eighty-two cents or something, and then eighty-seven cents or something. It was a big, big deal. But it was big money in those days. Twenty-five cents got you in the movie.

McCreery: That's true.

Johnson: Yes, so it was good money. Besides that, it was the place to work during the war because you had gas ration coupons and you had coupons to buy tires. Lousy tires, but you could buy them, so you could keep your cars running.

McCreery: You got to work by driving your own car?

Johnson: Oh, no, I would jump on the back of a streetcar and steal a ride. You had free passes, but we would go down and we would jump on the back tailgate of the streetcar as it left Oakland High School, down Park Boulevard and go to work.

McCreery: So you'd just rather do it that way?

Johnson: Yes. Yes, it was more fun to steal a ride than to get on like you're supposed to. So you learned to accept people, as we were. [Later on] you had more empathy for kids, if you will. Because we were kids.

McCreery: How many of you were there doing this four hours and four hours?

Johnson: I'd say about six down at the one station that I worked at. I worked down by the lake. Lake Merritt [streetcar] station is what it was. Yes, it was right there. There's a huge shopping center there now, but back then it was a major streetcar yard.

McCreery: Did you like the work?

Johnson: I can't remember that. It didn't bother me. You just worked to get paid, to get paid and have fun, and that's what we did.

McCreery: Just like any kid.

Johnson: Yes, yes. No, we didn't pay that much interest. You just did what you did. There was no great glory in it, no. But we learned to do things better or faster. As kids, you looked at some of the adults, and you cringed a bit and thought, I can certainly do better than they did. And we did. A couple of kids--we could do what maybe four adults did. We always looked at it that way. Maybe that was wrong, but they always used to get us to slow down, calm down, whatever. "We got a make a living doing this, too."

McCreery: Yes. Now, did you work only on the streetcars at that time?

Johnson: Yes, only on streetcars.

McCreery: And after the war--?

Johnson: After the war, I came back and went back on the streetcars, yes.

Navy Service During World War II

McCreery: Let's talk a little more about your time in the navy. You say you lied about your age to get in?

Johnson: Certainly, yes. I signed on as a "baby crew." I told them I was seventeen and it was supposed to go till I was twenty-one. I really wasn't planning to come back to Key System; I was just going to go in the navy and make it a career or make something out of it.

Like I mentioned, we went to schools for submarines, and then after Pearl Harbor, working there, the ship went to Guam, Midway, off on war patrol. We were up in the Sea of Okhotsk, which is north of Japan. We had some fire--shot the torpedoes. We fired the guns. We did our thing. We killed a few people. You just had that.

The esprit de corps with the submarine service was tremendous. We had good officers, and the men were screened out so if you weren't compatible, you wouldn't stay aboard anyway. It was a good way of training. You knew that every man depended on everybody, and you became very precise in what you did, and you became very critical of equipment, especially to keep everything in tip-top shape. You had to, as a matter of survival.

I can't say enough for the group of men that dedicated themselves to the submarine service. I currently serve one day a month on the [USS] *Pampanito* over in San Francisco and take tours through on the boat and answer any questions about that, because she was a sister ship of the *Kingfish*.

McCreery: How large was your crew on the *Kingfish*?

Johnson: Eighty-two people. The crew varied, depending--if you pulled into port, if you got new sonar, they might add three more people aboard to maintain 24-hour sonar operation. And some boats, because of deck action, had a second 6-inch gun or 5.5-inch gun. Then you needed additional people for the second gun crew. They varied anywhere from eighty to eighty-seven, the crew. But here again, they were pretty well screened, and the officers were human. They were human. It was great.

Played a game of tackle football, officers against the men, before you left port, to get all the animosities out of your system, and when you get back aboard ship, it's "Yes, sir," "No, sir," "Thank you, sir." They had a lot of good things going that would be quite illegal in today's modern thinking. Politically, totally incorrect. So be it. It was successful at the time.

McCreery: Now, tell me more about the events where you saw some action.

Johnson: Well, basically, as an enlisted man you didn't know what you saw. You were underneath. You heard something, and you'd know we shot torpedoes, and we'd know we missed a lot of people. We know some of our torpedoes went underneath other ships. On deck action, I knew when we went in--at nighttime you'd go in, with your guns going, to shoot down fishing boats, or sampans, as they were, because they were forewarning the Japanese about the aircraft coming in. So we would sink them. And then immediately, when the war ended, everybody said, "Hurrah, we're done." And we went--we were one of eight that actually escorted the [*USS*] *Missouri* into Tokyo.

Our job was to be sure that all the mines were cleared out so that the *Missouri* didn't hit anything, so [laughter] I was up on the bridge. The gunner's mate would shoot--they would explode the mines ahead of us as we went in. But then we never even hit the port. We got the *Missouri* in, and we turned around and went back to Guam.

McCreery: That must have been quite a day.

Johnson: Yes. Well, we were surprised that we didn't get to go on liberty there, but we had different [laughter]--there's nothing to do on Guam, when you go back to Guam. So we went back there.

McCreery: How long was your service overall?

Johnson: Three years, seven months, twenty-one days. Then I got out.

McCreery: Now, you mentioned that you had originally thought of perhaps staying in the navy. I wonder what happened. I mean, the war ended and so on, but what happened that brought you back to the Key System?

Johnson: Well, there was a period of time they put the *Kingfish* out of commission and put the *USS Tusk* into commission, out of Philadelphia. That was a peacetime navy there for a short

stint, and we took it on a shakedown cruise down to Brazil, up through Dutch Guyana, places like that, through the Panama Canal. But the peacetime navy is quite a bit different than the wartime navy. You didn't have the excitement of the combat or potential combat. I wanted to get married. I wanted to get out, so I got out.

McCreery: You were still pretty young. What, nineteen or twenty?

Johnson: Then I was twenty, just about twenty-one when I got out, yes.

McCreery: So you headed back here to the West Coast?

Johnson: Back to Oakland, back to Oakland. Yes, I went back to Oakland.

McCreery: So that would have been maybe 1946?

Johnson: No, not till January of '47.

Returning to Key System, 1947

McCreery: Was there any trouble getting back on at the Key System?

Johnson: Oh, no, they held a job for you. They knew that. They held a job open. You just went back to work like you always did. That's what you're supposed to do. The war's over; you go back to work.

McCreery: Everybody was doing the same, coming back and looking for work. Now, had things changed much at Key System while you were gone?

Johnson: No. It was still there. It was just work. It was just work.

McCreery: Still working on streetcars?

Johnson: Still on streetcars, yes. Basically doing nights, doing brakes, shuttling the cars around where they belonged, or taking care of any small things that might be wrong with them. Things like that.

McCreery: Who were you working for? Do you remember much about them?

Johnson: You mean the bosses? I think the foreman's name was Jim McCracken. They called him Diamond Jim because he'd been there fifty years. Burkett. Burkett was the night shift foreman that I worked under. I don't know how I remembered that; it was so long ago!

They were good people. They just demanded eight hours' work, eight hours' pay, and that was it. Key System of that era was very proud of the fact that you could set your watch by those streetcars. If they were supposed to be at Fourteenth and Broadway at that minute, you could set your watch. And they operated the trains and the streetcars, the same thing, that way.

To have a breakdown or have something go wrong was horrible and unheard of. "We can't have that. We can't have that." And they really fought to maintain a reliable, really a very reliable service. Here again, Key System was poor inasmuch as they didn't have the subsidies that you have in transit today. They paid for everything. They paid taxes; they paid fuel tax. Even the buses paid the bridge toll. They paid gas tax. We had to change the license plates every year. They paid all these things, so the men were basically underpaid because there was no more money for that.

It was not uncommon for the majority of the workers, not so much on the trains but later, as time went on, like in the fifties, that most everybody worth their salt had a second job. You'd work your eight hours with Key System, then you either went to work at a gas station, tow car, liquor store, grocery store, or something, to maintain a good standard, a better standard of living.

McCreery: Did you do that as well?

Johnson: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. This may lead up to the transitional period, to AC Transit, when it finally came in. But with Key System, it was always money-poor, and you could never get a raise; you could never get anything. You really sort of felt you were stymied in your positions, wherever you happened to be, be it on the trains or streetcars or actually on the buses. Same thing. You would have to fight for every nickel raise you got. It was a very--let's use the word "cheap"--outfit. But, like I said, they didn't have the operating subsidies as we do today.

By the same token, it was like family. The foreman knew all his men, and he would assign the jobs accordingly as to what their capabilities were. Everybody halfway helped

everybody else. Everybody knew everybody else, just like you know your brothers and your sisters when you were growing up. You knew what they could do and what they couldn't do.

But you didn't document or put on paper any of these things. This was just the way it was. This one was fine; this one was not so fine. When people came to work, like new hires, if they didn't perform like they should after thirty days or sixty days they're on trial, they let them go and that was the end of it. There was no recourse, if you will, and lawsuits and the rest of the stuff that all came into being after AC came in.

It was like family. You did your eight hours' work, you got your eight hours' pay. That was, I guess, a basic foundation for many things, and maybe it affected my thinking in later years with AC. I can't expound much on that, but that's how it was. It was just family.

McCreery: Now, did the system promote from within when there were openings?

Johnson: Definitely. The system promoted from within. Everybody--it had virtue. I can speak more to the buses now because I was a short time on the trains before they went off, and then I went into the rubber. Everybody started as a sweeper, which had virtue. From a sweeper you became a fueler, a service employee. You got a raise. A service employee would fuel a bus, check the oil, water, et cetera, and park it. The sweepers didn't necessarily have to park. But, now, if you became a service employee, you did do those three functions: you did learn to service it, and--if you park them, you learn to drive the vehicle because buses are sort of unique.

There's no school--there's no place in this whole country that teaches people how to drive buses. You learn to do it there. So you learn to park these buses. You learn how they sound, you learn how they feel, and you become halfway educated without realizing it. So when an opening for entry-level mechanic occurs, you would sign on that job and put your name on, if you had enough seniority. If you were the highest seniority, they would give you a thirty-day trial as an entry-level mechanic.

And you worked up to Mechanic C, B, A, relief foreman, foreman, superintendent, manager of maintenance. This is the ladder of progression, and this worked very successfully in Key System. It was our way of life, and it was our way of--you knew if you had loyalty and time and expertise that you would eventually go up the ladder.

This, of course, is out now in the nineties and the two thousands. People don't think that way anymore, but that's the way it was back then. It had virtue, because you were halfway trained before you--you knew a lot, more than you realized it, when you became an entry-level mechanic. You knew it sounded correctly, you knew it felt right, you knew what the brakes felt like, and so when you went to adjust brakes, you knew if it was good or bad when you'd drive the bus off the pit. You knew right away if it was good.

You could listen. You could hear a funny noise, you'd tell your foreman, "Hey, there's something wrong with this one," and it would go from there. So this is on-the-job training, if you will. If one wishes to get philosophical about it, it was a wonderful way for people with not much education to go very far. You didn't even have to know how to read and write that much. You could become a successful, good mechanic, because ironically, many people who are very good with wrenches and very good with mechanics are poor with a pencil. It goes on and on. Axiomatically, many that are very good with a pencil couldn't adjust their own roller skates.

So this is partially how it is. When we were Key System, we were totally integrated, far more than we are today. We had everything that anybody could hire, provided they could do the work: American Indians, Filipino, Asian, African American, Caucasian, every size and shape of person was working there, male and female. If a female wanted to try, she could try. Females were doing the brake adjusting during the war and seemed to go away from it when the war ended, for whatever reason. Not too many went into heavy-duty mechanics, if you will. That's another issue.

From Key System to AC Transit, 1960; General Manager Al Bingham

Johnston: So we, as Key System, had, I thought, in the maintenance department, a totally integrated unit that was functioning like clockwork. The buses had to go out; they had to do this; they had to do that. They were still attempting to set the watch by when the bus arrives and when it departs. This worked good, and we thought it would proceed that way when we went into AC Transit. Could I speak freely now?

McCreery: You can. Let me turn my tape over and give you plenty of time.

##

McCreery: You were just starting to talk about the transition.

Johnson: Yes, the transitional period to AC Transit was quite wonderful. All at once, one night, we had new decals, AC Transit decals to put on the side of all our old--and we covered the Key System decal with the AC Transit decal as the buses came in at night, and before they were ready to go out in the morning, they all had the AC Transit decal on.

Part of the new regime: they gave everybody a one dollar an hour raise. This was fabulous. This was big, and we were in fat city, if you will. Everybody got a dollar raise. Everybody worked. Here again, the machine kept going. We were happy with it. At that time, I was active with the union, as a shop steward there, too.

One thing I insisted on when we got into this was--we got a whole bunch of new buses from GMC [General Motors], the new--they call it fishbowl look and the big fronts--and one thing I did insist on, and we were successful in getting, was a shop manual for every mechanic. We got that, and from there we started forward.

AC Transit continued to expand, and it continued to work very efficiently, but as we went along, as we lost people, the people that we were receiving to replace them were, I think, hired from the unemployable lines. We were not allowed--and if you came aboard and you put them on trial and if you didn't approve of them, it was an act of Congress. You were taken down to the personnel department, and they wanted to find out why this person was not acceptable.

Here again, they were pushing, I know, to put minorities in. It has virtue to do that. But we were not allowed to screen out the minorities that didn't want to work, didn't care to come to work, or just plain didn't know anything, and to get the minorities that were really capable of doing this. I know they were out there, but we weren't allowed to get them.

McCreery: So the hiring practices were changing a lot?

Johnson: Dramatically.

McCreery: You weren't hiring your own new employees? They were being hired by someone else?

Johnson: No, the personnel department changed, and the new personnel department would direct as to where these people came from. They had a quota, although they denied it was a

quota, because that was illegal. But they did have their quota, and they came in and they would announce to us that “thou shalt hire, train, and retain these people.” All of a sudden, as the employment evolved, we were being hurt quite badly.

McCreery: Just to clarify, what was your job at the time of the transition?

Johnson: I was just a mechanic then, but I could see this happening.

McCreery: And you got into management later?

Johnson: Yes. I didn’t get into management until ‘74, so I had quite a few years of just being a mechanic. And there were several years when we were working--it took a while for this change in personnel to take place. But AC Transit was very successful for those first few years.

Our general manager--the first one. It’ll come later [Alan Bingham]. The first one. He was wonderful. He was a dedicated transit man. He would ride the bus to work, and if the operator was rude or didn’t dress properly, he would get to the office, and he would have that man brought in--pulled off the road, replaced, and bring him down to the office and talk to him.

Every new group of drivers that came in went down and met personally with the general manager. He tried to impress upon them the high standards that we had worked toward and what we had to begin with there. He was a very dedicated man. Unfortunately, he died of a heart attack there.

If you went to do anything special, he would call you down to the office and sit you down on a one-to-one basis and impress upon you the importance of what you were doing. Very fabulous person. I guess maybe he spent too much time there, and maybe the intensity of his command--Bingham. Mr. [Alan] Bingham [general manager 1968-1977]. Yes. The intensity of it--maybe that’s why he had the heart attack. I’m not sure. But anyway, he went.

Subsequent leaders, general managers, were there. I don’t know if they were as effective as Mr. Bingham ever was. That’s my own opinion. They were never as intense about what they did, and they were more in the political realm than into the actual nuts and bolts. He was into that, the nuts and bolts of it, and to make it happen. He was a “people” person, Mr. Bingham was.

McCreery: Yes, I was kind of wondering, what kind of a guy was he just to sit down and talk to?

Johnson: I guess his background actually came from the *Oakland Tribune*. I think he was reporter or something to begin with. But he was very intense and very into transit and to making it work. He headed some national things for the US. He started this trans-bus program, which eventually escalated into a degree where it failed because they were complicating it too much.

His goal was to have a simple bus, a simple set of specifications that was put out to the public, and from there any bus manufacturer that met these specs could build the bus and it would be delivered at a lesser cost. But unfortunately, the bus got too complicated, and that issue failed. But he was a dramatic person. He attended many [meetings] of the national levels of transportation personnel, and it showed.

I was lucky enough to be on that trans-bus program, so I know what I was talking about with that. We got further training back at Detroit Diesel, Allison Transmissions, back at the different General Motors assembly plants as well as the Rohr Corporation in Southern California. I wrote Mr. Bingham a letter that was critical of the program because the vehicle we were getting was far more complex than the people we had aboard could cope with, and I was pulled off the project. As it turns out, the project did fail because it was too complex, and it went from there.

The Bus Fleet; Changes to Hiring Practices for Mechanics

We were blessed at the time with General Motors buses. They were finely engineered, aluminum technology, lightweight. I think our 40-foot buses were 18,000 pounds; 18,300, something like that. When the buses were delivered, the factory rep would stand behind them with his arms folded, like the Maytag washing machine man because there was nothing wrong with them. You couldn't find anything wrong with them. They were completed as delivered, just like you'd receive an automobile.

With the advent of the low bids and the things with the public monies, all of a sudden everybody got into the act, and we have numerous manufacturers, and we still don't have any to this day that--when they sell you a fleet of buses, they'll send a group of mechanics out to repair all the little things that go wrong with them. They won't have a

“Maytag man.” They’ll have a group of six to eight mechanics to fix the buses as they break down during their first year of operation. That’s ludicrous to the passenger of AC Transit, who endures the breakdowns and “late-for-works” and things like that.

For a while, when we first got into AC, we had a fine group of buses, a fine group of personnel, a fine group of leaders, and it was beautiful. We were, I would say, averaging 18,000 miles between breakdowns to begin with. This dropped. As time went on, it dropped and went on and on as years progressed. We can jump a little bit. As we got the different buses, we got--what kinds did we get?

McCreery: I take it that it was all GM at the time you became an all-bus fleet?

Johnson: Pretty much. It was mostly GM. We had some Flxible buses; we had some Whites, White gasoline jobs; we had numerous other, different brands. They just took over the whole thing when they bought AC Transit. But they had a basic--a huge purchase of General Motors buses, which were what I considered--we knew what went wrong with them, and we knew what was going to happen with them. For example, the modern bus today has got instead of 18,000 pounds, it’s 30,000 pounds, so you know you’re carrying around an extra five tons of junk with you as you go.

McCreery: Why are they so much heavier?

Johnson: They don’t have the aluminum technology. They’re all made of steel. The other is more costly, but here again, it’s low bid, and the low-bid process precludes many good things. The first one to low bid General Motors was Flxible Corporation back in Delaware, Ohio, and that was back in ‘74, ‘75. I went back on the inspection group with that. But here again, they had people out--right away, had two people out here, doing nothing but retrofits as the buses came in. They didn’t have a “Maytag man” anymore. It was the beginning of the end.

After that, we got Flyer buses out of Canada, and we got Neoplan buses out of Lamar, Colorado; we got MAN buses, which were part German and put together in Texas; and then we got the Gillig. That’s the local Gilligs, down here in Hayward [California]. When they came into being, they were basically school bus manufacturers for years, and they were successful at that.

Then they went into the transit bus operation. It sounded good. It was real good to have something local, where there were local jobs and local investment and everything

else, but in my opinion the bus was a disaster, and still is. We had everything conceivable ill with them. We got the early ones. Maybe the ones you get today in 2001 are okay, but the ones that we got were not, and the warranties--they didn't want to pay any warranties; they didn't want to do any--no matter what went wrong, it was "poor maintenance."

We were used to the General Motors bus. We averaged 250,000 to 300,000 miles on an alternator. The one that came with the Gillig, you're lucky to get 40,000 out of it, and it had to be changed. "Poor maintenance," no matter what went wrong.

They had what we call the nine-bug radiator. In other words, if you had eight bugs in the radiator, it was okay, but the ninth bug, it would overheat. It was just marginal. It would just barely make the grade with everything you every had. The cracks--and suspensions would break. Whole frames would break up. The lower suspension was really not adequate, especially going across the bridge in the afternoon in the summertime, when you have winds. In the Bay Area, we have a nice wind that's twenty to thirty knots.

[tape interruption]

McCreery: All right. You were just talking about the changes to the bus manufacturing and the reliability of the equipment. Talk a little bit about how your tools changed. You had said they were very simple and manufactured in house way back in the old days with streetcars.

Johnson: Oh, no. That's a different deal. With the buses, it was all tools that you purchased yourself on the side. Oh, yes, standard tools. Most people got them from the trucks that came by and delivered them. Snap-On tools were the best. Mac tools was just as good, I guess. Sears tools were okay. They're guaranteed, so if you break a wrench, you can take it back, so Sears was okay in that realm, but they would stretch and the sockets would break when you didn't want them to break. So no, you had to purchase your own tools. Everybody did.

McCreery: And there was no longer a need to make anything custom? You really could buy everything you needed?

Johnson: Yes, you could buy them. So you purchased your own tools. In fact, today I think the union has negotiated quite a tool allowance, maybe close to \$200 or \$300 a year for the

mechanics to keep their toolbox up. Whether they spend it here or spend it in Reno, we don't know. They just have to have tools to do the job.

McCreery: Now, when you said you were getting away from the GM buses and were buying all these other brands, how did that change the tool and equipment needs, if any?

Johnson: It didn't change the equipment needs that much. The first case of buying metric tools [metric versus U.S. threads] came, of course, with the German bus, with the MANs, and so you just had to buy metric tools to adjust to it. It wasn't that bad. The tools are a little bit different. And nowadays, every mechanic everywhere has a combination of tools. Here again, the MAN buses--everything above the floor level was U.S. threads; everything below was metric threads, so you had both sets of tools. It wasn't that hard to deal with.

McCreery: But it sounds as if these new buses coming in really made quite a change in your work over time, the fact that they weren't as reliable?

Johnson: They required far more attention, and they weren't dependable. You had to go on road calls. It went from--when we were MACs it was 18,000 [miles between road calls]. It dropped down to about--it finally got so bad it was down to about 2,000 miles between road calls. That's horrible. It was just a combination. So here again, if you want to evolve through years, and the different types of equipment. The personnel changed. You couldn't get and retain the people that you--you couldn't get rid of the not-so-good mechanic. It was just very difficult to do. Because we were not used to documenting everything that everybody did, we--the maintenance management--would be called downtown to personnel and/or the lawyers, and they'd say, "Well, how do you know he isn't a good mechanic?" "Well, we know he's not a good mechanic. He can't fix himself." So they say, "Well, you have to document that."

Then we had this learning curve, to document this person that was on trial. Then, when we failed them again, we'd go back. "Well, you can't do this. You've got to document everybody. It's not fair what you're doing." No matter what you did, it was "not fair." And then some, they even admitted--after you document everybody and every job, then they would come back and they would go to arbitration, all the way to arbitration. No matter which [mechanic] you failed, it would go all the way. It was just the way they did the business between the union and the personnel department. In many cases, the foreman would just throw his hands up and say, "The hell with it." This was very difficult. We had a very difficult time with the personnel. The buses complicated it.

And then the wheelchair lifts came in. [laughter] It was a whole new world when they passed the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act]. We had to put some of these wheelchairs--we put some test ones on, which were disasters. We started to buy some locally out here in San Leandro. Absolute disaster. They were not programmed right. In fact, unfortunately, two people got killed. Some drivers, even when they had a lift-equipped bus, wouldn't pick up a person because they knew [the lifts] were unreliable. And I talked to dedicated drivers who would not pick them up with that lift. It was a horrible thing.

But here again, we used the expression, "they legislate improvement." In other words, they decree that, "You shall have a wheelchair lift that works by year 2000," but the people that make these laws up and have these dreams up--they're not the ones that have to go through the process and involvement of manufacturing and installing the lifts and making them work. It took years to do this. But meanwhile there was numerous, numerous breakdowns and service interruptions and hard feelings between all the other patrons and the wheelchair patron, because the bus stalled. "Now I don't get to work because you can't get aboard."

And the cost involved--we figured out, we could have given every handicapped person in Alameda County their own van and a full-time driver for the money that was invested in wheelchair lifts and the breakdowns thereof. It was atrocious. It was absolutely sick. So we have so many negatives going here!

McCreery: Well, that's okay.

Johnson: Personnel, equipment, wheelchair lifts. Now you come down to where the board of directors looks at the numbers when you have these extreme breakdowns. I actually had eight Gilligs that had fires, real bad fires, eight Gilligs. They blamed it on poor maintenance, that our people weren't maintaining the bus; therefore it was poor maintenance. Some of them we knew were engineering flaws. The wiring was underneath the bus. It shouldn't have been. It should have been up in the bus. But here again, low bid, and local--we're nice people.

San Diego had them burn to the ground, San Mateo, Sacramento, and us. I tried one time to have a meeting, where all the maintenance managers at the time could meet and discuss what can we do as a group, what's wrong with all these buses that we can have some kind of a program. Well, the word got out that I was trying to have a meeting, and I was called into the legal department and told, "Back off. You have no business doing

this. It's our job to buy the buses; it's your job to fix 'em. Now go from there." Political. Very political.

McCreery: Can you tell me exactly who told you that?

Johnson: I think he's dead now. Mr. [Robert] Shamoon, operating manager. Yes.

McCreery: How did you react after that happened?

Johnson: You still continue. You continue your work, you continue with adversity, and you just do the best you can. But here again, the service level was deteriorating as we go along, and the board would bring in consultants. They had several major [management] shakeups, to realign people, and they got rid of a lot of good, dedicated people by doing this realigning.

They brought in I guess it was Booz, Allen consultants, and they put Mr. [Neil] Peterson as our general manager for a while, which was a whole disaster in itself. He got rid of some very dedicated people that were [with the company] even back from the transitional thing. They had gone up the line and became foremen and what have you. They affected everybody, myself included. I was a manager at the time, and I had done nothing wrong. They said, "We aren't going to fire you. What do you want to do?" "I'll manage the equipment, and we'll write up a new set of specifications." Then I formed a department.

So that's how I started on the specifications and inspecting of buses. And that was at least ten years before I retired, where we would write up--because we were used to receiving, like I said, a very reliable, substantial piece of equipment. We would just order a bus, and you'd get it. You just ordered what color you wanted it.

These others made us toe the line and specify everything you wanted to have. You had to spec the reliability. You had to spec everything else. This is how we evolved into the bus specification business. It's not fair, but that's the way the world is, and you keep going with that.

McCreery: It's interesting to hear you talk about why that all came about.

Promotions to Foreman and Maintenance Superintendent, 1970s

McCreery: Now, let me back up and ask you, when you first went into management, you said that was around '74?

Johnson: As a foreman, yes.

McCreery: How did that come about? What happened that you took that promotion?

Johnson: A foreman retired, a Mr. Vince McCarthy. He was a foreman that had been there even before, with the old Key System. He retired. He's still living. He's living down in Arizona. I get a Christmas card every year from him. Send him one, too. I became a foreman because of the opening. People would apply as you went along, and they would select from there.

McCreery: Now, what were your exact duties as foreman? I can guess, but how large a group were you in charge of and so on?

Johnson: Whew. I had day shift at Emeryville. I'd say about thirty to forty men. You would get your work list every day, and you would attempt to work down [the list]. Most buses that had problems, like electrical or air, would be left over for day shift, so you attacked the problem buses on the day shift, where--it's really easier on a human being to work days than it is to work nights. I sympathize with people who work the late shift, the graveyard shift. You didn't criticize them for that, but anything that required a little bit more effort, they would leave for day shift. So this is what you tackled. You tackled the major overhauls, engine overhauls, transmission changes, and the major big things you would tackle on day shift.

You knew how many runs you had to fill in the afternoon, and God help you if you didn't fill them. You had to fill your runs. There was no such thing as not enough equipment. That was not acceptable in those days. It was not acceptable to begin with, until we got these later issues that we talked about. So there was no out-lates, zero out-lates and zero cancellations for equipment. All the buses went out. Period. That was it. So you worked generally from seven till four or five to get your day shift done.

McCreery: How did you like being a foreman?

Johnson: It was good. It was good, because you had control of the equipment. You could call your shots as to what was to be done, which one to be overhauled, which one not to be overhauled, and you could go from there. It was good. It was a good education, too. It was a good education. We had good superintendents at the time.

When I was a foreman, I tried to go to school at Chabot College for management training. I spent about two years doing that and learned about it. That was good.

I guess you just do it. It's like when you first went to work. Whatever was needed, you did. It was a continuation of this process that was already started for you, and you just continued it. But you didn't have any major education in how to deal with people and what the affirmative action things mean or whatever else.

McCreery: It's a really different job from being a mechanic, isn't it?

Johnson: Yes. It's hard to put the hands behind your back and tell people how to tune an engine, versus doing it yourself. It's a different world. It's a totally different world, and sometimes it's exasperating because some people--to be a good mechanic, in my opinion, is like being a pianist. I can't play the piano. I can fool with it. That's it, and I know it. But some people are not born to be mechanics, and they never will be. It's just the way it is. But some people can't accept that, and they'll screw everything up for the rest of their lives. [laughter]

But being a foreman was good. I was that for several years, I guess for four years, and then I became a superintendent. I was a superintendent in Emeryville, in October of '78.

McCreery: Okay, so foreman from '74 to '78. Emeryville, was that the main maintenance yard?

Johnson: Yes. Because we had the rebuild center right there also. So if you were foreman, you just had the shop, but when you became superintendent, you were superintendent of the rebuild shop as well as the actual division, Emeryville itself. So you had a double job there, which wasn't all bad. It was good.

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McCreery: You were just talking about 1978, when you became a superintendent. Now, tell me again, how did that come about? What opened up that allowed you to take that job?

Johnson: The maintenance manager, Mr. [Anthony] Lucchesi, retired, and this created a maintenance manager job, which Mr. Dick Bertz was the successful bidder on, and he became the maintenance manager. Then an opening came for a superintendent, which the foremen all bid on, and then I was selected and awarded the job of superintendent of Emeryville. That was the process.

McCreery: What did you have to do in that job?

Johnson: Well, it was to oversee both the rebuild shop facility there in Emeryville as well as the main shop, which operated three shifts out of Emeryville. We had close to 300 buses at the time. It was a very crowded yard, and a very old yard. In fact, it used to be a streetcar facility years back. It was a converted thing. It had its own little problems, just being a yard. You had the full personnel--I guess we were close to 100 employees in the main yard and then another forty in the rebuild facility, so 140 people.

McCreery: Tell me something about the rebuild function.

Johnson: This came from--Key System evolved into what we had there at the rebuild. We rebuilt everything: brake valves, windshield wiper motors, engines, transmissions, everything. We never bought anything but parts, and we rebuilt everything ourselves. This way, we had control of the quality of the rebuild. We could call our own shots. Sometimes it even cost a little more to rebuild yourself, paying the labor and the parts, than [the amount] you could buy a new piece for. It was different back then in the seventies. Today it's a throwaway society, where we just throw everything away, and it's cheaper, by far, with offshore brake valves being brought in. A brake valve can go anywhere from--right now you're getting them for \$20, \$22 at the lower level, when they're manufactured offshore. You can put a new one in for that, and it may cost you close to \$100 to rebuild it. So it's economic to just take the offshore one and stick it on the bus when the current one is leaking.

We rebuilt our own engines, and we rebuilt our own transmissions. Here again, with the personnel changing, as it started to evolve--we used to rebuild an engine--it was standard. You could rebuild an engine in forty hours. If you couldn't rebuild it in forty hours, you go get another job. You could rebuild a transmission in eight hours. If you couldn't do that in eight hours, you go get another job.

Well, this is all changed, of course. This is the nineties or the two thousands now, and people don't work at that level. They don't work at that level. It just doesn't happen. So

transmission changes, transmission overhauls, [now take] a day and a half, two days. Engine overhauls increased from five days to eight days. Sometimes in the new world maybe it's ten days, and if they don't really give a damn, it can be thirteen days. This is the nature of the game, part of the transition. With old Key System it was forty hours and you would start the rebuild, from one end to the other.

We rebuilt our own alternators and upgraded them as we went along. We rebuilt the little relays that control the alternator and upgraded them as we went along.

McCreery: And this is still true in the seventies?

Johnson: Yes, still in the seventies. Now, of course, you don't rebuild any relay. If it's a defective one, you throw it away and put another one in. Maybe it's cheaper and faster, far better. Some things are so superior today than they were in the seventies. You get better metals now, stronger metals, and we get far better adhesives, far better paints. You get a lot better things. I'm not totally negative about today. This is the reality of it. [laughter]

Some things are really quite improved on, with technology. Epoxies today are just tremendous. And they can rebuild some of the parts using the technology they have today, adding metal spray on a crankshaft, things like that, for engines. Instead of buying a whole new crankshaft, they can metal spray. They can weld blocks with the new welding rods that are far superior to what they had back then.

We were of the feeling that everything should be rebuilt in house if at all possible, which we did, and that was the rebuild yard over at Emeryville.

McCreery: Now, as superintendent, was overseeing the rebuild yard significantly different from the main maintenance yard, as far as what you had to do?

Johnson: Mainly the personnel that went into the rebuild facility would bid on jobs as openings occurred there, and the higher seniority, more experienced people would go in there. From that, you didn't have to worry too much about the level of competence there. Many of them were from the old school, the rebuilders. They were back--the old Key System thinking. They were happy in what they were doing. And another thing: they were guaranteed days and Saturdays and Sundays off. They didn't have to work night shift on this, and we were a twenty-four-hour operation. Therefore, it was a good job to have, and they kept it.

McCreery: Tell me about this system of bidding on jobs.

Johnson: Whenever a job became open due to a vacancy--people retire or they just quit or they go--it would be posted, as per union contract. Some jobs, like for the general rebuild, would be posted at all divisions. At that time, they had strictly division seniority. If an opening for a journeyman mechanic came up at Emeryville, they would only post it in Emeryville, and then if nobody bid on it there, it would go to all the divisions. So this is all controlled by union contract. That has later changed now. I think they put all bids to all divisions. But at the time, that was the way it was operated.

McCreery: Now, the main maintenance yard, then, there were certainly some mechanics who were less experienced than those in the rebuild yard. What kind of problems did you face [in the maintenance yard]?

Johnson: I think there's nothing I could put my hand on. The only problem you had was if they adjusted a door improperly or something, and then it went on the road and a road call [would be necessary]. Then you'd have to find out who did it and what have you, and find out why, what happened, and how do we make sure it doesn't happen again.

McCreery: Very routine kinds of things?

Johnson: Yes, very routine, very routine. I put a lot of hours in. It was expected. It's a twenty-four-hour operation, so you always double back at night; make sure everything was still operating. You could look at the workbook up at the foreman's desk, and you could make sure that they had enough buses to complete all the runs, the pull outs, the following day.

McCreery: Now, did the total size of the fleet change much in those years?

Johnson: We put on many more runs. We went from 750, I think, to close to 1,000 buses at one period of time. We were expanding, expanding. In fact, AC did all the preliminary work of Contra Costa County's [transit system], too. Where they got that facility out there? We did the line purchase, we did the soil testing, did all the rest, got all the permits, got everything done, and then we could not fulfill, from union constraints, the buses that group out there wanted in Contra Costa County, so they formed their own [transit agency].

I don't blame them. I think they did a wise thing. Just break away from AC. Because at that time we were starting to go on this downhill level. And they started hiring their

own people. They took some of our equipment, old Flyers--that's a brand of bus--old Flyers and other vehicles that we had, to start their facility out there. They've since operated their own.

Then we sort of pulled our tails back, and we also got out of the BART extension business. We used to run the BART extensions all the way out to Pittsburg and out to Pleasanton, Livermore. We ran the BART extensions as the BART extended out there. We got out of that business. So now it's down to around 730, 740. It's more manageable. We figured through the years that a very manageable economic division should be about 250 buses, no more. After that, you're overloaded; and underneath that, you're not economic. It was about the right level, was 250, you could operate at and make it work successfully.

McCreery: Now, tell me about the new Central Maintenance yard, when that opened up. Is that what it's called?

Johnson: You mean Central Maintenance? It's the old GM building [in Oakland].

McCreery: Is that the one they call CMF [Central Maintenance Facility]?

Johnson: Yes. It was a General Motors truck and bus facility, is what it was before. That was sort of a multipurpose movement to create jobs within the core of the City of Oakland, too, which it did to a degree, but then maybe it didn't. The idea was to get out of Emeryville rebuild there. Initially we were going to try and get rid of that, and I think Kaiser Hospital wanted to buy that whole block of land in there, and that never happened.

The rebuild facility was well-intentioned. They were going to have an assembly line type of thing, to rebuild engines, which we didn't need. Some people had a lot of grand ideas about what they were going to do about this thing and were going to run it--I don't know. They had big ideas. We actually took ten of my best buses out at Hayward and tore them apart, the best-running GMCs I had. Took the engines to be core units or trade units for CMF. Transmissions, valves, everything else, so they would have a stock to start them with. The ten best buses.

Then they scrapped them, and then they eventually threw all those parts away. The whole thing was ludicrous. The whole thing was just ludicrous. They hired new people from the outside, completely new. It was not his fault. It was Mr. George Skezas right out

of the [Alameda] Naval Air Station, because he had been running the rebuild for the navy over there. The navy was going to shut down, so we hired him to run it over here.

It was hard for him, too, because he had never seen a bus. He had never operated a bus, and he had his own marching orders to deal with. They brought in a bunch of other people from Naval Air to do things that they were really never destined to do. So that was part of CMF.

They needed a bigger warehouse, and that worked out well. The warehouse there works quite well, and they do distribute everything from the warehouse part of it.

We were in the middle of a grand rebuilding operation at X amount of bucks to rebuild all the divisions, from Richmond to Hayward to Emeryville. Part of the grant, I guess, was to build this Central Maintenance Facility. It has since evolved into being halfway decent. It was a very hard adjustment and everything else to get it all going. Very costly. They spent big bucks on that.

They made, I thought, some major mistakes in the rebuilding of it, of all the divisions. It would have been so much nicer if we could have finished one division, move the buses there, without having to operate these buses while they're rebuilding it. This is like cooking in your kitchen while they're putting the stove in. There was a period when the wash racks didn't work, the steam racks didn't work. You couldn't wash a bus; you couldn't steam-clean an engine; you couldn't do a thing. And you were driving around in the mud. The buses looked horrible. They were never cleaned. It was really a not-too-well-thought-out operation.

Tied into that, they had major cost overruns on the rebuilding of it. To make up that money, they just wouldn't replace maintenance people as they needed them. They had to have drivers to fill the runs, but, "Oh, we just won't have any more cleaners." They stopped hiring cleaners; they stopped replacing mechanics or foremen. We had a major shortage of people. We were very low to begin with--ratio of maintenance personnel to the vehicles. We were lowest in the country. Then to short us another thirty to thirty-five people was ludicrous, but they did it. We were still told to survive. There were some bad things going on there, really some bad things during that rebuild. Richmond got hurt real bad, and the level of service, of course, was affected by it. It just kept going.

I'm just glad it's over with now, because there were things they had to do. They had to put in these double-wall fuel tanks, the buried fuel tanks. There were things they had

to do, and there were good things that happened. Now they have a far better ready room for the drivers in the operating part of it.

I wouldn't say they have any better maintenance facilities, because when they rebuild, they're great for doing away with the pits. Pits are wonderful. You can drive a bus on, work on it, go underneath, check the brakes, and park it. Now you have to drive in on a solid floor, and if you're going to check the brakes or anything, you've got to use a hoist to pick it up, to work on it. It slows the whole operation down. Each division has a pit dedicated for brakes. If they're going to do that on a major thing--but so many other jobs are so much easier to work underneath a bus.

So anyway, I used to argue with them and fight about that. I've been kicked off some nice properties. I was a superintendent. At that time, I was out at Hayward, and they were building a whole new Hayward facility. I used to get in arguments: "Why can't we have more pits?" I finally got banned from the property. [laughter] I've been kicked out of some wonderful places, I'll tell you.

McCreery: Well, did they move you around to the different maintenance facilities as a superintendent?

Johnson: Yes.

McCreery: How did that work?

Johnson: They tried to do that as things came along, move people. I was Division 2 for a while, then went out to Division 4 in '82. Then I became maintenance manager in '83, and after that, they created a new reorganization, when things were really going to pot in '83, and I became a general superintendent in Hayward. There I had the operators as well as the maintenance, in Hayward, yes. So I was superintendent of both levels. And I had an assistant superintendent for operations and an assistant superintendent for maintenance. And it worked out quite well. It was a small division. We only had, like, 130 buses. And we were very successful. We were too successful, so they called us "the country club" out there. [laughter] There's no country club anymore. Anyway, it was a small-time operation, but we were working, functioning very well.

McCreery: I'm curious, just going back a little ways, when you would work on buses--you know, back when you spent all those years at Emeryville, for example--how much interaction was there between the mechanics and the drivers?

Johnson: Not that much. There were some drivers that were dedicated. When they were through with their shift, they would come down and say, "Listen, Joe, that bus is bad." Bus 341 or whatever it is. "It's got a funny noise when you make a left turn." Some would come in and actually interact with you. Many of them just gave up. They said, "Well, the hell with it. They're not going to fix it anyway, so why write it up? Why do anything? We don't care." You had that part of it, too.

I had interaction with them as superintendent. When they would "road call" a bus and our mechanics found nothing wrong with it, I would go to the operating superintendent, and we would try to talk to the driver. "What happened? What happened? How come? You say it wouldn't start, and now it doesn't fail. Where were you at? What happened?" I'd tried to find some answers to the questions.

No, I tried to interact with the operating department, because that was my background, working with operators. I tried to do that, and tried to keep them happy. I used to express to them that, "If I keep you happy, then you won't road call the bus, and it makes me look good." So I did try to keep them happy, yes.

Early Role as Shop Steward; Thoughts on the Union

McCreery: Yes. Again, thinking farther back, you mentioned that you were a shop steward for the union. When did you first join the union?

Johnson: As soon as you go to work, you had to join the union.

McCreery: So that was in place going back to Key System.

Johnson: From the beginning. Yes, way back, way back, yes.

McCreery: And when did you become a shop steward? Was that still in the Key System days?

Johnson: Yes, Key System days. Yes, Key System days.

McCreery: Okay, because I'm just trying to get a picture of what was involved with that. I know it was a very well-entrenched system.

Johnson: Yes, it was a well-entrenched system, but things were different then. If a man fouled up, it would be company practice to write a letter, an adverse entry in his record as to what he did wrong, and we'd give him that. Back in those days, I was just a steward, but the business agent--we were like AF of L instead of the CIO. The business agent would pull that mechanic aside and chew him out worse than the management ever dreamt of chewing him out, because, "You're making us look bad. You're making the union look bad. We are craftsmen. We are professionals. You are a professional, being paid a professional level. Therefore thou shalt do this, this, and this." This is from the business agent's mouth. And this is how it used to work in the old days. Different. Different now. Now you can do no wrong. But that's how it used to operate.

McCreery: The expectations were out there, and if anyone needed reminding--

Johnson: Yes. It was so different. If you were a mechanic and you were putting an air compressor on and you broke a stud putting it on, you'd look around. You would get that stud drilled out, replaced, put a new one in, and put it back in place, and that would be the end of it. The newer thinking is they'll put the compressor on, they'll break the stud, and they'll go have a coffee break, and then they'll run to the foreman at quitting time and say, "Oh, the compressor is already installed, but there's a stud broken." That's the difference. "Oh, it broke. The stud broke." They don't say, "I broke it." They say, "The stud broke." That's the difference in the mentality of the CIO and AFL. It was a far different professional level. [laughter]

McCreery: Now, when did you become a shop steward? Tell me about that.

Johnson: Oh, I was just a shop steward shortly, before--I guess that would have been back when AC first took over. I was there for about three years, yes.

McCreery: Eventually, later on, you went into management.

Johnson: Yes.

McCreery: And so that was a big change in that regard?

Johnson: It wasn't really. It wasn't really.

McCreery: It wasn't?

Johnson: No, because like I said, in the union part, we were making the men, begging the men to do a better job anyway, because we had this professional level. It was a different-- nothing like today. The union was there just to keep the status quo or to try and improve conditions, if you will. I had many internal fights with the union because things that I believed in came to pass later, like this universal seniority. Now we have it, where mechanics can sign from one division to another on an annual basis. We never had that to begin with, so I was fighting for internal things.

I was fighting for a choice of medical plan. My father died under the old one, so I wanted an alternate medical plan rather than the one that was offered. I wanted split vacations so that if you did work up to three weeks: two weeks here and one week there. That's the types of things I was fighting for. Eventually they all came to pass, but not during my realm. But I like to think I planted seeds.

McCreery: Yes. And those were the kinds of issues that the union was [involved in]?

Johnson: Yes, and to get maintenance manuals for the people. This makes everything work better, not just the individual.

McCreery: Yes, that's pretty basic, isn't it?

Johnson: Yes! Very basic. [laughter] So that's what I was trying to do.

McCreery: But you're saying that when you then became a manager, it wasn't that great a change.

Johnson: No, not at that time. Today it would be a dramatic change because right now the laws are such that the union has to fight every case all the way to arbitration. Things get a little personal before you're through with arbitration. You go all these different levels with people.

McCreery: Before we talk about your time as maintenance manager and all that, I do want to follow this union thread a little bit more. You know, there was this big strike in '74, and I wonder if I could get you to just talk a little bit about how that came about, in your view.

Johnson: Well, it would come about because of wages. Basically, everything is wages. When I was in management, we had the big strike, but the management people still continued working. In fact, we brought our tool boxes back, because we're all ex-mechanics. We brought our tool boxes back. We cleaned up everything in the shop, all the--transmission

needed changing, brakes relined--we did all the work, put them out in the yard, and scrubbed, cleaned every bus so that they were spotless on the inside. You know, scrubbed all the floors out and made them all like new.

Then we would line them all up, and then every other day you'd move every bus, like, three feet and move them back, to keep the seals from taking a set. The seals on the engines, transmissions and the wheel seals couldn't take a set. You had to move them every other day to keep the buses going. So we in essence were management, but we were workers. We were glad when the strike was over. We could go back to just being a manager. [laughter] We did a lot of work, did a lot of work. Got a lot done.

McCreery: I wonder why you think that one lasted so long, though. That was quite a blow to the system, I would think, a two-month strike?

Johnson: Yes. I don't know why. I don't know why. Here again, it was money. It's all money. And sometimes it's the union trying to set a precedent, and power, ego. A lot of that stuff, too.

McCreery: Yes. But it's interesting to hear you talk about the changes in view of the union.

Johnson: Oh, yes, dramatically, yes. Now if the union doesn't go all the way to arbitration with a case, the employee can sue the union and collect because they didn't fight his case all the way to the wall. So it's a different world, and we have to recognize it as such.

I don't know if, based on what we're talking about, if one could advise other groups, if they were contemplating changing from private enterprise to public, what--maybe from this you could tell them what to look forward to [laughter], or to be ready for, or educate themselves beforehand, rather than having this so-called learning curve as you go along.

McCreery: Yes. You probably didn't know what you were in for.

Johnson: No, no. To us, we were fat city. With [Key System], really, we were on top of the world, top of the world.

McCreery: You really feel the difference is because it became a public system?

Johnson: Yes, because with public you have a whole different set of laws on who you can hire and who you can fire, and you can't control the personnel like you thought you could. If the personnel department--whatever they elect to do--if you need a welder, they'll come up

with ten names, and they'll hand you the names of ten people. Well, now, what do you do with the ten people? You give them all the same piece to weld, to see if they can weld. If none of them can weld, you send the ten applications back to them and say, "No." "Oh, certainly one of these must have been good. Oh, you can't possibly--pick the best of the ten, then." You know, they have all these outs that they throw at you. I'm basing this on when I was there. Today the world has changed again, and they're back being on a positive note with the apprentice program and things like that.

II. DEVELOPING THE MAINTENANCE FUNCTION FOR AC TRANSIT

[Interview 2: June 28, 2001]##

Promotion to Maintenance Manager, 1983

McCreery: I thought we would start off this morning talking about the time when you became maintenance manager for AC Transit in September of '83.

Johnson: Yes, September of '83.

McCreery: Yes. Tell me just generally how that came about.

Johnson: How did that come about? Mr. [Dick] Bertz had a health problem, and he retired, not on disability but he went to a full retirement. Briefly Mr. [Glenn] Ashmore was in there, and then he had a heart attack, and he left. Briefly Mr. Al Villata had it for a week or so, and then he didn't want it, so then the only one left was me, out of [all] the superintendents! [laughter] So I applied for it, went through the bidding process, and was awarded the maintenance manager job.

McCreery: Now, how did you feel about taking on the job? Were you interested?

Johnson: Well, certainly. This was anyone's goal who started out on a low level; you wanted to get to the top level, and you always felt there was things you could do and things that should be supported and pushed to make the system run better. There was so much to do and so little time and so few people, but you felt that you could make it better. No, I put my heart and soul in that.

McCreery: Who hired you into that job?

Johnson: I guess it was through the personnel department with the bidding process.

McCreery: Okay, we talked about that last time.

Johnson: Yes, the personnel department, and I was approved, and then I went in as an acting [manager] for several months, until we came to that point where we had a positive feedback from UMTA [Urban Mass Transit Administration] on our record keeping, and I was awarded the maintenance manager's position.

McCreery: What was your approach to that new job?

Johnson: My approach was to continue the things that I considered positive and to make things better, to try and get my input into the method of hiring, to try and get more people aboard to fill the empty slots in the maintenance department, to attempt to use my influence to get better equipment to operate. That was my approach to it.

Another approach was communication, to hold meetings, meaningful meetings with foremen and try and iron out things that were wrong on the property. We did hold these meetings regularly, at least every other week.

I tried to do some things that were different. For example, when we would get any new equipment in, I would invite the fire departments from all the cities--because we were composed of about seventeen cities--so I would get the fire departments in and expose them to where our batteries were, where fires and things may happen, to get a better feel so that people were not afraid of it.

I tried to further educate myself. I attended Lubricating Society seminars on my own, management training at Chabot College on my own. I did a lot of things on my own to try to make myself better and more competent in what I was doing. I hate to talk about *me* all the time. From AC Transit's point of view, I was trying to reduce road calls and improve the mileage per road call, and trying to do it with the personnel we had, which was rather limited.

McCreery: Where were you located when you took that job?

Johnson: In Emeryville. I was there, and I was well familiar with that because that's where I spent the bulk of my career as a mechanic. It was central. Here again, it was very efficient, because one manager ran the total division there as well as the rebuild shop, which was adjacent, was part of it there at Emeryville. So here again, the whole thing was very effective.

And we had close proximity--we were in close contact every morning with every superintendent of each division: what buses are you down for, what parts do you need. And we would chase and be sure those parts, if we had to, got to the rebuild section and rebuilt and back that afternoon so that they could be put on the bus so we didn't miss any schedules.

We ran a very tight ship, and people knew it and knew what was expected. We really tried to make it work.

McCreery: How much interaction did you have with the upper levels of management?

Johnson: Not that much with the upper echelons because they were in their own political realm, and at that time I felt, myself, that there was a lot of downtown backstabbing, political people looking for their own gain, a lot of inter-department rivalries, and [people] looking to better themselves without really looking at the district as a whole.

I attended meetings where required. I tried to run our end of it in a very seaman-like fashion so that it was as efficient as possible. We did have to make reports to the board at times. I would give maintenance reports to the board when required and would try to do that in a very distinct and accurate way so that there were no lies or ever anything exaggerated with the maintenance.

The first several months there I attended Toastmasters International, to improve my delivery so that I was not using bad words and using useless words in my presentations to the board. So I got along with them. I pretty well, halfway got along with my boss downtown. At that time I believe it was Mr. [Robert] Shamoon, but here again, Mr. Shamoon had his own agenda, and his was not the same as mine. That's just life.
[laughter]

McCreery: What kind of a boss were you to the superintendents and so on?

Johnson: I don't know. I've heard I mellowed in the latter years, so I must have been more of a strict person. I would not tolerate cancellations for lack of service. They could call me or anybody in the morning. The crucial pull-out time is first thing in the morning, between five and seven in the morning. The graveyard, late-shift foremen all had direct orders to call another division, to borrow buses, to do what they had to do or call me. We'll do something, but we will fill the runs. We will have a bus, a clean, mechanically good bus ready for each run in the morning. Period. And we pretty well stuck to that.

We did a lot of close inspection, even at the front gate, as the buses were ready to leave. Were they properly cleaned, were they not? And we tried to run a tight ship on that realm, and I thought we did. Sometimes they would use the word "chicken," but that's okay. I don't care. Just so we got the job done and we did fill the runs. That was our goal.

McCreery: It sounds as if you took it all quite seriously.

Johnson: I did. I put twelve to sixteen hours a day into that job, whether they knew it or not. To make these things happen, you had to do something like that. But we had no cancellations. And that was okay.

I believe other agencies throughout the country had tried a different method to reduce costs. Here again, maybe there was a cost crunch [at AC Transit]. There had to be, because we were so short of people. [Other agencies] would reorganize these transit outfits and each separate division--of which we had four, and we had the rebuild, maybe five--had their own cost center. They thought, well, this would be much more economic. So instead of having a maintenance manager, we'll just have five divisions with no maintenance manager. We'll just have five divisions, with each having its own superintendent.

Reorganization of Maintenance, 1985

Johnson: [Following] this, [AC Transit] did reorganize, in March of '85, and that's when I left the maintenance manager job and became the general superintendent of Newark, or Division 6, where everybody took a cut in pay. A lot of people lost quite a bit on that deal as they reorganized and did their thing.

McCreery: Do you recall whose idea it was to reorganize along those lines?

Johnson: No, this was a board decision. Now, who influenced the board, I don't know, but the concept had already failed in Santa Clara County and it had failed in other parts of the country, but they went ahead with it anyway. Who these advisers were, I don't know. They were probably highly paid professionals who truly believed that would work. We made it work at Newark. I was very proud. I think some of my better time was spent down there, with accomplishments, if you will.

Here again, it doesn't matter which type of management structure you have, it's the people who make it or break it. Now, some divisions could cope very well, if they wanted to, with that independent cost center, with no maintenance manager to answer to, and others--some could work it well, and some would fail miserably. It just depends on the personnel, the people. That's what makes any organization: the people make it. Period.

All these high executive-level decisions are meaningless--they can direct all kinds of things, but if the people aren't there, dedicated people, the thing will fall apart. I had a wonderful opportunity in Newark, having what I had. I had a background of operations from my childhood as well as maintenance. I got to do more things than I ever did in maintenance, and we made it work. We did some beautiful things.

We worked with the senior citizens to adjust the hours of our operation to the senior center. Every time I got a new piece of equipment, I would attend the city council meeting up in Fremont, and I would allow the city councilmen to ride the bus, drive the bus around the yard. It's all legal. You're not doing anything illegal. It's in the parking lot. We could do this, to make them more bus friendly. Everybody has a negative feel about buses. "Oh, the old noisy, smoky, smelly buses. We don't want them."

I was trying to change that image. I was fortunate to work, through this area, with the City of Fremont, to get into the planning commission. Therefore we would go into a housing tract before it was all built, and we would put where the bus stops would be. We put the bus stops in ahead of time, before the homes are sold. This way, nobody complains about, "I don't want the bus stopping in front of my house." Some preferred it, so they would buy a house next to the bus stop. Others would buy their house two blocks away because they don't want to be at the bus stop.

We worked on that level. We coordinated with and we tried to work with the city planners again when they realigned streets, to have a pull-in place for the bus so the bus is safer for loading, unloading, and not interfering with traffic.

We attempted--in some places we failed to have the bus routes directed into their place. We were not successful with NUMMI, the new Toyota plant down there, because they came right out and said, "Our business is selling cars." We wanted to provide a shuttle into there from the BART station because many of their workers came from Oakland. It would have been the sensible thing to do.

We devised new routes that went down into the industrial section for the lower-income people to work with. We did a lot of good things. Off the record--or however, on the record--reasonably close, even, to our division was a shelter for battered women or women who had a problem with relations, whatever. They would come with their kids, and every one of them had a car that wouldn't start. Our mechanics, on their own, at lunchtime or after hours, used to go and help the people. We would leave food and clothes there. So we had our own little sideline of taking care of the battered ladies down there in--that was actually in Newark. It was a secret place, where nobody knew where it was, but we knew where it was, so we went and helped the people.

Here again, I would invite the fire department: "Come in. Let us know what we need." And we would comply, ahead of time. Not wait for them to make an inspection, demand that they inspect. Get everything in the open. Make it work. We had a very good thing going.

Our big problem was when we wanted an engine or a transmission changed, we had to have it done at Central Maintenance, which was now operating. Every time we got buses back from there, they really weren't completed. They weren't done correctly, and we had to redo them again. Our cost center was charged close to \$2 million a year for the services of Central Maintenance, and I told them I could buy on the outside better. I would take my business elsewhere. I didn't want to deal with them.

Of course, this is politically incorrect and should haven't have happened, but this was just the way I felt, so I was not afraid to express myself. Apparently things started to--cancellations were occurring at the divisions, except ours, across the board, and they could not supply the equipment and what have you. At that point, Mr. Gene Gardiner, who was a manager, came to me at Newark and said, "Would you come back to Central

and take it over?" This occurred in '86. I was reassigned to Central Maintenance in July of '86.

McCreery: How did you feel about making that change?

Johnson: Happy, because I knew there was so much to be done at Central. It was a beautiful, big, expensive facility. They spent an arm and a leg to get it. But it was not producing the things that we wanted. It was not keeping up with the needs. It really wasn't efficient, and the whole thing was--it really wasn't efficient. So I went up there and attempted to make it work better. I truly tried.

We tried to build up engine transmission modules and have them ready for buses, and if there was a bus that was crippled, if you will, it could make a short trip with a school frag,¹ and we could use it at the division until we got our module completed, so we didn't cancel that run. When that module was completed, bring the bus in and we'll get that thing changed out in two days and get it back to you with a new engine transmission module.

We got the module system going, and we worked carefully with the rebuilder, trying to get down into the nuts and the bolts of it as to what's going wrong. Why are the generators not living? You rebuild them here, they work here, you take them down to the division, and they don't work anymore. We attempted to bring the system back up to where it was before.

The person who was running it before was transferred downtown. In fact, they put him in charge of the building maintenance program, because at that time I think Mr. Carl Knudsen had retired, and so he took over the building maintenance program, which was quite elaborate in itself because it included the general office, with all its problems, if you will.

Everything we did with AC Transit was low bid, and consequently all kinds of things were wrong. Even at Central Maintenance, all the below-the-floor pipes, all the hydraulic pipes had sand around them. Well, now, the low bid operators--they didn't put clean sand there; they put salt sand, right off the beaches, and the salt ate right through the pipes. We had hydraulic leaks everywhere. At AC Transit's cost--of course, those contractors

¹A "frag" is a short fragment of a total "run," the school "frag" being a special trip to a school.

are now gone--we had to rebuild the complete plumbing supply system to it. The dynamometer never worked. We had to get that all rebuilt.

There was many things wrong with Central Maintenance. It was done in a hurry. The tool list that they had for it was incorrect. It was based on the cable car workshop in San Francisco, which was stupid! [laughter] They had ludicrous sets of tools and vises and things for the cable cars and nothing for our buses. I guess it's a bit comical, but that's okay. [laughter]

McCreery: You had your work cut out for you.

Johnson: Oh, yes, yes. Every place I went, I had my work cut out for me, and that wasn't all bad. We did stop the cancellations of equipment for lack of equipment. We did stop that. And we were, I thought, operating in a more efficient manner. We were still short of people, but we were operating, I thought, successfully.

And then the board saw fit to hire Booz, Allen consultants to come in and evaluate what we were doing and what we should do to improve the place. I guess that took place in '88. In the early part of '88, Mr. Neil Peterson was a heavy, articulated-bus advocate, which is fine. Nothing wrong with that if you have good equipment.

The purchasing agent, Mr. Glenn Andrade and myself were sent to Seattle to evaluate their program, which we did. Came back, and I was sent down with Mr. Andrade to Santa Clara, to evaluate--they had thirty Icarus buses, which were purchased from Hungary, which they wished to dispose of. I spent two days in Santa Clara and reviewed it.

They had some buses that had never run. They had never operated. They stole parts from them. They were very poor buses. They were some of the first ones that they built over there. And the wiring was different on every bus. You couldn't get parts for the door engines, the door shaft, the steering shafts, and things like this. Some of these buses Santa Clara never had got running in the three years that they'd had them. But they wanted to get rid of them.

I came back and wrote a scathing report to Mr. Peterson that we should not buy them. Period. That they were really a junkers. The following day, I was invited to breakfast with Mr. Neil Peterson. I was told I wasn't flexible enough and therefore I would be removed from my job, thank you. I was kicked out for that.

Especially when I was in Seattle, some other young Turks had got to people and said that what we were doing was wrong and that they could get those articulated buses going, and they would do this, and they would do that. Fine. Mr. [George] Skezas was made the equivalent of a maintenance manager, although not that title. They picked four new superintendents of divisions, and the superintendents were allowed to pick their own foremen.

Starting a Technical Services Unit

Johnson: I was allowed to start this equipment office, and they were of high hopes that--they would call it a rubber room, where people would do nothing and therefore they would have bad periodic reports on themselves and would eventually be discharged. Anybody that was a foreman that was not picked by this kangaroo court group was given to me.

Now, this would include any foreman who demanded eight hours' work for eight hours' pay. It would include a foreman who was too smart for the people around him or were smarter than the superintendent. And so I was very lucky. I received the cream of the crop, and they were sitting with the cull. [laughter]

Rather than sit on our bottoms and be ruled out, we went to work. Here again, politics be damned. We went to work. One thing we were lacking in was warranty support. I sent a man to each division each day. "What broke down yesterday that was in warranty? Find the part, trace the mechanic"--because they would never write down what they did--"trace the mechanic, make out the report, and we will submit it." We did this with the four divisions. We generated close to three quarters of a million dollars the first year.

Meanwhile, Richmond found that it could not keep its buses on the road, and one of the men that they had to get rid of, Mr. Homer Reagan--they called him back, so I transferred him back to Richmond. Now, he was not a foreman, and they had cheated him out of his pay and whatever, but he worked and he did whatever it took to make these buses go, primarily on the door adjustments, small adjustments on the articulated buses and on the MAN buses and things like that. He finally got them educated out there, and after six months he said, "The devil with you all. You picked my brain but you want all the glory." So he retired and moved to Tennessee.

Other of these foremen--one by one they found that where they came from, they needed that type of person that was more demanding of work performance, and one by one they pulled them back.

Meanwhile, anybody else that couldn't get along with anybody, they would give to me. I was so lucky. [laughter] This is just the way it worked. But here again, I seized it as an opportunity. I could make this bus better for the driver. We investigated. We got a better driver's seat. We got the best driver's seat in the nation. We installed drivers' barriers behind the driver, to protect them. They can't get hit on the head anymore. They've got a place to put their personal stuff without it being stolen at the end of the line, or the kids running off and stealing their lunch and stealing their sweater.

We evaluated the transmissions. We found a transmission that would live and was rebuildable and that was smooth shifting, and people were happier with it. We coordinated the outside mirrors. We finally got that through the training department, because every bus had different kinds of mirrors and what have you. To get one mirror that will work, left and right side, and if all the people who went through training were trained with this one mirror--or set of mirrors, I should say--then that would be acceptable throughout the fleet. We tried to make this standard, to get things like that going.

The Lift-U lifts that we were operating--they were bad. We had lawsuits from--was it the lift's fault? Was it the people's fault? If they tried to stow the lift too quickly, and a piece of the wheelchair would be sticking--the wheelchair patron would say, "Okay, I'm clear." And they would pick up the lift and it would dump the wheelchair patron. Bad injuries. Head injuries and things like this. Another one: an attendant, when the lift comes down--he had his foot stuck underneath, where the lift was going to go, and it squashed his feet. We had a big lawsuit.

So anyway, I worked with Lift-U. They're down in Escalon [California]. Made trips back and forth to get them to improve the safety edges. Everything they do with the lift had to be cleared through the CHP [California Highway Patrol]. They finally, engineering-wise, got it changed so that we could improve that.

We worked with the bus specification book, where we could take and improve this bus so it would be a better bus, more reliable and easier to drive and more acceptable to the passenger. We were never totally complete because we still, with the low-bid process, ended up with Gilligs [buses], which have their own flaws, in my opinion. Some of the

buses that we're purchasing today even have the same flaw; namely, the heating systems are backwards. They put hot air to the patrons' heads instead of your feet. Anybody, even the people that engineer these buses--when they buy a car, the heaters put heat on their feet, but it puts air conditioning, the cold air, on your face. It's sort of logical. Why they think people that ride the bus aren't entitled to the same comfort, I don't know. But this is how they are backwards. I used to fight this all the way.

I also fought for rear windows. I like a rear window. I've had the police department come up to me after a bid--we were successful--and they'd say, "Thank you, we like the rear window. We can follow a bus at night and be sure everything is going well in there." The patrons like them because in transit centers they can go to the back of the bus, and they can see what other buses are coming into the transit center. "Shall I get off, or shall I just stay on this bus, and I can walk two blocks to home, or I can transfer." They can make decisions with that rear window.

I'm successful sometimes, with some, but I was never successful with Gillig. They would not put a rear window in. They would never do it until they had a 300-bus contract with Seattle. They could do it, but they just jolly well wouldn't do it. We used to fight with them about that.

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Johnson: So here again, rather than look at all these places you get transferred to as a negative, if you accept them--what are you there for except to improve the transit? I tried to have that philosophy, to improve myself as well as the district. In doing so, I rattled a few people's chains and that bothered a lot of people, but the motive--and we always seemed to make it work. Wherever we went, we seemed to make it work. With that in mind, if you have positive thoughts, you're going to go ahead and do these things in a positive manner, I swear, you get good ideas on how to implement them.

I was never successful in collecting that much warranty money from Gillig, and it bothered me. Sometimes they would pay if you had a second order, a subsequent order coming. Well, then they would pay to get that order, but they were very negative and blamed us for everything that went wrong.

McCreery: Were you actually procuring new buses at this point?

Johnson: Oh, yes. All through this we were.

McCreery: You were in charge of that as well?

Johnson: Yes. Before we got new buses, I would go and talk with drivers: What do you like, what don't you like? What can we do to make it better? And every time we got new equipment, I used to go on the road with the equipment and ride around and talk to the drivers and talk to the passengers. Sounds stupid, I know. Nobody does that now. You don't have to do that. You're not supposed to do that. But I used to do these things. I did spend a lot of extra hours doing these kind of things, to find out what works, what doesn't work.

McCreery: Now, talk a little bit about your procurement specifications and how those might have changed.

Johnson: You mean from before, what we did to it? We tried to put in there things that would--you had to base it on performance, by federal guidelines. Some things I was vastly against, like the heating systems that were backwards that heat the patrons' faces, which I thought were wrong. Some of the things I tried to get, I was not successful. Many things.

I don't like the suction of the fresh air back in the engine compartments, where they are, because buses went alongside each other, especially when one passes another or when they all pass each other in the San Francisco terminal, one will tend to suck the exhaust of the bus that's adjacent to it into its heating system. If you go into buses where this occurs, you can see the soot lines coming down from the ceiling. You don't have to be too smart to know what's going on.

And you look at the destination signs that used to be all beautiful and white. They're all full of soot and they're all gray. And you can see these on the road if you go to look at it. When you get reports of a driver falling asleep in the morning--they take a bus out and go to the end of the line and there'd be a negative report against him: poor driver, bad driver, fell asleep, I say, "No, they were exposed to carbon monoxide."

I used to fight these kind of things, and I empathized with the driver. It's not their fault with this type of equipment, the way they were sucking the exhaust right into them. And if one didn't believe that, all you had to do was go look at the screen that takes the dust out of the air, that goes into the heating system. Are there particulates of exhaust there? Hello!

So I tried to improve this. I did get under-floor heaters in the new Flyer buses. Not the greatest bus in the world, but it does have a heating system that's comfortable. They did produce the rear window. They would give us a rear window, and they would give us the under-floor heater. Now, you can continue doing this until you're politically ostracized because of the local company who is going to stay in business [Gillig] and therefore [some people think] you owe them a certain allegiance, which I never did.

It's things like this that hurt public transit per se. We had a period there where it really wasn't that great. Today's better buses are far superior. But that period of time, about a ten-year period, really hurt us, the drivers, maintenance, everybody concerned, when we had to put up with those buses. Some are still on the road today. Many are still on the road today. You'll see them. But if you get into the San Francisco terminal and they do suck [the exhaust] in, it's not healthy.

McCreery: Let's talk for a moment about quality control. Did you start a formal program?

Johnson: When you say "quality," to us quality is if it has a life span, if it'll work for a given life. That's a quality you can't prove. You can look at something and say, "That's good" or "It looks good." We don't care if it looks good or not. Does it perform? That's all we really care about, was performance.

McCreery: That's what we've been talking about, what you would look for in your equipment and what changes you wanted?

Johnson: Yes. Quality control. We would try to address that during the production of the bus. We want the joints to meet, we want the seals to be sealed, we want the roof to not leak, we want the windows to not leak. Here again, that's the quality control we're looking for. We want the doors to work without having to be adjusted every night. We want the steering--if you want, tighten it and torque it. We want the steering to stay stable. That's the quality that we're looking for.

Many manufacturers--of course, they're dictated by the bottom-line dollar, and they cut corners that you wouldn't believe, and if you don't have inspectors to look this over, you don't get what you think you're going to get, or it gets on the road and it's not acceptable.

McCreery: Yes. Now, you talked about bringing in money through this new tech services area. Were they giving you sufficient company budgets to carry out these operations as well?

Johnson: You mean my tech support service? The wages for my people were included in the Central Maintenance budget, which was already budgeted for there.

McCreery: You had enough to do what you needed to do?

Johnson: I just had the people, yes.

McCreery: Okay. And you're talking about bringing in money. This was through warranty follow-up?

Johnson: Yes, from warranty claims we were bringing in money. We'd submit it right down to the general fund. Several times, people got it through their head that we were keeping the money there and spending it ourselves, and auditors came in from any number of places, from the fed, even [internal auditors] from AC Transit. They had heard rumors that we were cheating. And I would just open the doors and all the books and say, "Here you are, friend, have at it."

I would not take a check [made out] to me ever. I would never take a check to the maintenance. The checks were all made to the treasury department of AC Transit. Period. Gillig wanted to give us parts at times instead of money, but the parts, of course, would be given at the retail price and not the price that they paid for it, so we really didn't want that; we wanted the monies, and the monies went right back in the general fund. What the general fund did with it, I don't know or care.

All I know is that we did our job. We made AC better by doing these things, and hopefully it would wake up the manufacturer. If he has to pay money, it would wake him up to build a better product. And sometimes when they get all through, in the final analysis, they'll come back to you and they'll admit that, "Well, you made us build a better bus." And we did, in several cases, make them build a better bus.

McCreery: So you took this department that they hoped would just fold and you turned it around, turned it successful and even into a money-making operation?

Johnson: Yes.

McCreery: Did you get any recognition for that?

Johnson: No, I didn't need recognition. I have my own recognition. I go sailing on Saturdays, and I enjoy the world. And I have a clear conscience. I know I did what I was supposed to do. I don't need that. No, no. Oh, they had a nice retirement dinner when I left. Wonderful. Really, truly wonderful. I'll give you the [video] tape for that if you wanted to.

Aside on Retirement, 1999

McCreery: Well, let's talk about your retirement. First of all, how did you decide when to retire?

Johnson: I was in Hungary, actually, inspecting buses for the NABI [North American Bus Industry] bid, and I got an e-mail from my boss at that time, Mr. Pat Cannon, and he says, "Well," he says, "as of today you're working for thirteen cents an hour." Because the pension plan came through, and whatever pension plan that the union had, they approved for the management people. They figured out the pension value and said, "The difference between what your pension is and what you're getting is thirteen cents an hour, so you better think about what you're doing." So I said, "Okay, I'll retire." So I retired.
[laughter]

McCreery: That's pretty convincing!

Johnson: It doesn't come out quite that way because you do pay your own perks. And it was time to go. What the hell? It was time. I was seventy-something, and it was time to go. So I went, went happily. [laughter]

McCreery: Tell me about this party.

Johnson: It was a beautiful party. It was at one of the major restaurants of Berkeley, at the pier there.

McCreery: H's Lordship's?

Johnson: Yes, H's Lordship's. And people came from everywhere, except from Gillig. Nobody from Gillig would dare put a foot in there! [laughter] Factory reps came from everywhere, from Detroit Diesel, from Allison Transmission, from NABI, from Winnipeg, Canada. They came from all over, yes. I had a wonderful time. And the

general manager [Sharon Banks]--she came up from Santa Barbara. She was at a conference down there. She came up for the dinner. It was well attended. It was 200 or 300 people there. It was just a wonderful thing. They taped it. I have a video tape, video-audio tape on it. Every once in a while I can sit back and look at that. They had a bunch of different people come to the mike and say their things. It was fun. I have no regrets. I'm living like a king. [laughter] Yes. I am. I'm living like a king.

McCreery: Well, now, you mentioned a couple of times going to Hungary. Just to back up, we talked about that off tape a little bit last time, but I wanted you to just tell for the tape about these different trips to Hungary: Why you went and what you were looking for, and why Hungary?

Johnson: Well, Hungary is where they built the first half of the NABI or the North American Bus Industry buses. We had such bad luck with the initial Icarus bus, which is the parent company of this group, that--and incidentally, they never did get those buses running, that I said they wouldn't get running. They never did get them running. So as part of this tech service, we were obligated to inspect the plant, their quality control program, what they do, don't do.

I made trips to Hungary to being with. We purchased initially sixty buses. These were 40-foot buses, with the rear windows, but they still had the exhaust system in the back, or the heating system still heated your face, but they did have the window in the back. I got something out of it.

I went to Hungary to do that, and when they actually built the buses, I went back to Hungary and processed that. I had people in my department who stayed. I had two primarily that stayed, Mr. Harold Radcliffe and Mr. Geisel Rider, who was somebody that nobody else wanted. We did a helluva good job over there.

Then, when they finished the bus, they'd bring it into Anniston, Alabama, and they put the American products in it to bring the cost of that bus within the 60 percent [rule], for the Buy America clause. The engine, transmission, flooring, windows, driver's seat, destination sign, electronics--everything was put together in that bus in Anniston, Alabama. We went through there.

We had three different orders of sixty buses apiece over different years, and I went to Hungary on three different bus buys. That's what we did on that. That was quite an interesting experience. I learned an awful lot about what quality control can be. They in

some cases went beyond any reasonable realm in producing stronger buses, like a tank. The bolts are all tensile strength-tested. You don't get bolts that break out of them.

They did have flaws in them when we first got these buses, but the basic flaws were the American-made products that we installed over here in Anniston, which drove us crazy. Oil in the air system, which hurt everything. Starters that were not engineered correctly so they would jam. Items that were maybe NABI's fault for engineering, but basically it was American products that went bad. They could fight back and forth all they want. But at any rate, NABI did pay the warranties. Whenever we had a problem, we did collect warranties, and they paid. There was no fight with them. And for that reason we would continue doing business that way. I believe the last order they did have was the low-floor buses, which--I retired, and I didn't get into the low-floor buses. I understand there is some controversy about those buses at this time. I can't speak to that issue.

They have since purchased buses from Canada, the commuter-type buses. You'll see the new beautiful ones that go across the Bay Bridge, for commuters only. We tried to do that back in 1975. We had some beautiful buses on the road, and we were sued by the NAACP because these buses did not operate in the ghetto; therefore, the poor people were paying for these buses but they weren't allowed to use them. So we had to take those buses off the bridge, the commuter service, and put them into the school district in Richmond, where they promptly cut them to pieces.

We didn't do that and today, in the 2000 era, they've come to more intelligent thinking on where we can put this good equipment, with reclining seats and with upholstery--it's beautiful upholstery, and it's comfortable for a commuter. We know that kids could cut it with a knife, but the commuters don't do that. So it's an improved era right now, versus when we were fighting the battles back in 1975.

McCreery: This may have been after you left, but weren't they also testing some hybrid electric buses?

Johnson: I think they're still in the process of that. That's a very expensive--those buses are really quite expensive. If it comes to pass. They're also working with hybrid cars, people are. If it comes to pass--we wish them luck. It's an engineering miracle. A lot of exotic numbers, pressures, very expensive to maintain. If they're going to use hydrogen for fuel, they're going to have to get the hydrogen and have to have a way to store it and have to have a way to supply it from the storage to the bus. It's going to be a whole new set of

training. I'm not against it. I'm just saying it may happen. But it's space-age stuff. It's wonderful.

McCreery: What are the best buses?

Johnson: The old General Motors buses that we got rid of after 1965. They were lightweight, they were comfortable, they had under-floor heaters--they had a heating system that was not noisy but comfortable. You could buy them with air conditioning--even have air conditioning and a rear window. They had air conditioners that worked. They were, like we said initially, like the Maytag man--I could give you some letters from patrons that said, "Which stupid fool bought these buses"--and they referred to the numbers on the Gillig buses--"that heat your head instead of your feet?" And "Why don't we get bus 601 and 603?" Old General Motors buses, that were comfortable.

These are commuters that ride the bus, that used to ride the bus, like from San Lorenzo all the way to San Francisco and back. They enjoyed their ride. They were comfortable. You give them these other buses, and they're not comfortable. They're bad. And the board of directors as well as the engineers and the owners of Gillig--they should be made to ride these damn things, and they should be made to understand what we're talking about, and not just look at us as if we're trying to be bad people or trying to be antagonistic. I'm really not trying to be antagonistic. [laughter] I'm just trying to get a decent bus. That's all we care about. I couldn't care less about the political end of it.

Views of AC Transit's General Managers

McCreery: What about this whole string of general managers that the district had for a while there? Just from your own viewpoint, what do you think was going on there that no one would stay in that job for very long?

Johnson: I think the board of directors made demands on them that they couldn't fill, that "we want this and this and this." You couldn't do it with the resources that you had. We were competing with BART for funds at the time. Many of the funding levels were halfway dried up. Piece by piece, a general manager would be devoting so much time to maybe lobbying Sacramento to get something like--they finally got so we don't pay bridge tolls; we just drive through--and things like that. Well, sometimes a general manager spends so

much time with trying to keep the district running that they don't have enough time to appease the board of directors and all their whims and wants.

Some of the board [members] were really nice, and some were crooked as hell. Some took advantage of the situation and just blew all kinds of money. It was almost a joke, with the conventions and the expense accounts they would put in for travel. They'd travel anywhere and everywhere, first class, of course, to "see how the other operations were operating." We were not alone. BART directors were doing the same thing. So it seemed to be the thing to do.

But the general managers were still trying to get funds to keep it going. Many, many things on the day-to-day operations of AC Transit nobody sees. You're in a continual fight with San Francisco as to where the bus can go, where it can't go. They're continually trying to shut down the Transbay terminal. You've got BART that wants to reorganize the different yards, and "*you* have to change to fit *us*." They actually made us shut down the A Line and the F Line, which were the two most money-producing lines, that commuted from the East Bay across. They made us shut them down and just build little shuttles to the BART station.

So the day-to-day operation for that general manager was really a pistol, and I sympathized. Anything that a general manager asked me to do, I would do. I mean, he gets guff from everybody and everything, and all he gets is complaints. He would never get one from me. Nothing but praise, because I empathized with what he was trying to do. He was trying to make the thing work.

Any number of them. Mr. Gene Gardiner. He really tried. They didn't appreciate him. I don't know if they appreciated [Robert] Nisbet. I don't know if they appreciated anybody. I don't know.

McCreery: Of course, as the board composition changes, things are constantly in flux, too, for each one of these general managers.

Johnson: Yes. Each one has their own ax to grind. There was a while when I had the board on my side, and I tried to take equipment--well, I would show the rear window, the under-floor heater--bring the board members down into the bus. "I will show you what I'm talking about. This is what I want." So then if you had the board on your side, you could deal.

Now, the board member that is in Gillig's district--you can never get him. I don't care what you say. It will never happen because they are politically coerced into this or that. Gillig was great for--I don't care which board member retired; they would buy a complete table of ten at \$100 apiece for the dinner, for the retirement dinner. Fine. I don't care.

The [Gillig] owner has his power boat down here on the estuary. They take people out for nice dinners and cruises on the bay and try to explain what a wonderful vehicle the Gillig is. Wonderful. I wouldn't go. A few smart people wouldn't go. The rest of them go. I don't care.

We all went for a weekend retreat up to Mr. Denny Howard's ranch, his house and ranch up here in the gold country. That was when Mr. Shamoon was--we were all up there for a weekend, and we all sat around and decided what would be good for AC Transit and what wouldn't be good. Well, now, if you're going to do this kind of thing, somebody someplace--it's getting a little much. It always bothered me, being on a property owned by Gillig's president.

McCreery: Well, you came from the hard work school, didn't you?

Johnson: Yes. And a lot of other people, not just me. There were others that were not treated fairly and that were really dedicated people. Quite a few were dedicated that were adversely affected, especially by Neil Peterson. As it turns out, he was a crook. He was taken, and he actually left here. He was fooling around on the side. His wife divorced him. He went to Los Angeles Transit. I guess he lasted there about nine months, and they caught onto him, and they fired him. I don't know where the devil he is now. But the whole thing was ludicrous, the whole thing.

Here again, they were hiring specialists to come in here. Even if they didn't have me doing those kind of jobs, they had other people of the same dedicated quality here. And you have some dedicated people down there today, that really try. I believe in the people we have there today. Those in charge, the new general manager [Rick Fernandez]--he's dedicated. I've had him down in the yards. He's down there at six in the morning, looking at the equipment. Yes. The others in charge--I think they're really trying, and they're buying equipment to make it work. It's a hard thing to appease everybody and to satisfy--even in the changing economic times--to make it all work on an economic level.

McCreery: Yes. Now, one last question about the board, and that is did you note any particular change when the board members began to be elected instead of appointed? I know that was way back.

Johnson: I guess I wasn't all that aware of the whole thing. I know initially they were appointed to begin with. After that, when the elections came, I didn't notice that much with elections. I just know that some continued to be reelected from different districts. I guess primarily [Roy] Nakadegawa was a good board member, a very clear-thinking person. He did a lot of traveling on his own. He would go to different places, and he would come back with ideas: Can we try this or can we try that, to try and make it run better. I think he's still currently on the board of directors of BART.

McCreery: He is.

Johnson: Yes. He was one that was dedicated to transit. You have some others that were--I don't have the names off the top of my head because I was never that really close to them, but some of them were really trying, and some were just there for what they could get out of it.

BART Changes Bay Area Public Transit

McCreery: Is there anything else to say about what effect BART had, when it was brought in, on AC Transit's operations?

Johnson: When BART came in, when they went to start up, they actually offered that anybody with AC Transit could go over there as mechanics or whatever they wanted to do with BART and maintain a certain status of eligibility on the hiring list. They were paying more, what have you. Many of us were from the old trains, which were Key System trains. We knew what train systems were and what they could do and what they couldn't do.

When BART first opened up, we thought it was a joke because the person in charge of that was a dreamer. They made no provisions for any train ever having a malfunction. There were no switchbacks. In other words, if one train went dead, they all went dead. "Nothing's going to fail. This is the new century." So they had no switchbacks.

They had their problems initially with many breakdowns and what have you, and every time they did, AC Transit would come to the rescue. We would have buses--bridges, as they call them--to go from one station to the other, to keep it going.

So we saw it with mixed emotion. They did know how to spend money. They spent more money for that one garage at Fifth Avenue--which houses the non-revenue equipment--they spent more money on that than AC Transit costs for the whole AC Transit, including 700 buses. So they know how to spend money, and this is fine. Maybe we missed the boat by not moving over there. [laughter]

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McCreery: We were talking about BART.

Johnson: Yes. And when BART runs good it's terrific. It's smooth. It's got a good heating system. It's noisier than a bus. If a bus were as noisy as BART, they would road call it and pull it off the road. They are noisy, and we know that, but that's a given. But people ride in reasonable comfort on BART, and when it works right, computerized and everything, it's wonderful.

When it has a flaw in it, it's a disaster. We knew that when we went from our Key System trains--we went from that to buses. When we had trains that would break down or have an accident or have a suicide or something, if you shut the system down, you were dead. The bus could run around things. The bus could be rerouted around fires, could be rerouted around civil disturbances, anything like that. The train cannot. The train is dead.

So we knew this going in, and we'd lived through this whole process of train to bus and now back to train. Trains when they're working right are really right. If I were going to San Francisco today, I would pay my money and go on BART. That's how I feel about it. It's a good system. I just wish that they would continue expanding because they're sitting on their bottoms too long. They've got to expand to make it better for more people. You start by building more cars right now.

The funds will come. The money will come. Period. They have to keep going. I know they're delaying the process to go into San Francisco Airport, but they should have been there in the beginning. They should quit fighting with Santa Clara County and just start building. We'll bill 'em later. Make it work! BART, the train of rapid transit, if you're going to promote transit, is the way to go.

The bus will be slowed down to the same level as a car on the freeway. No matter how beautiful the bus or how perfect it's running, it will be slowed to the level of the freeway. Same thing on the Bay Bridge. The Bay Bridge stops, the bus stops. So if people are going to be public-transit-minded, they will take the train.

McCreery: Yes. Now, early on, wasn't there some talk about having BART and AC combined in some way, or managed together?

Johnson: This comes from MTC [Metropolitan Transportation Commission] I believe. They were trying to have one set of management, one set of board of directors, and have one swallow the other. But which one is going to swallow which one? That would be the big political fight.

McCreery: My question exactly!

Johnson: Yes. Who's going to swallow who? At this point, of course, BART would swallow AC Transit, and then you'd be a second cousin. Would the service improve or wouldn't it? We ran BART shuttles for years, until that went out to bid, and then other people bid lower than us, and then, as BART expanded, that was no longer required anyway, and it worked out all right. It was a very hard area to service, like, out to Pittsburg, all the way out to Pittsburg. We used to have those buses brought out of Richmond or in Emeryville. That's a long way out. They go to the end of the line, and they have a dead battery, we're really bad because we've disappointed people, and it's very costly to service a road call out there. Tried to work with some local service stations or whatever to go give a boost battery or something else. Very hard.

McCreery: Surely BART can excel at serving one kind of area, and AC and other bus companies can excel at serving different kinds of patrons in different areas. It makes sense, of course, to have a coordinated effort. Do you feel there was an attempt to coordinate?

Johnson: Oh, there was an attempt to coordinate, and there's a continual attempt to coordinate, but most of AC Transit's suggestions are generally ignored by BART. There's maybe a certain amount of rivalry in there that should be removed that would make it better.

McCreery: But BART is the powerhouse?

Johnson: Oh, yes. It can draw the big money. AC, under Rick Fernandez now, they're trying to get back the commuter work, and I hope they're successful with some of it. They are buying

these new MCI buses, and I understand there's a whole new set of buses that are also commuter oriented that they're also going to purchase--they may be the new Dutch buses from overseas--to give the commuter another choice. Even if you're a bit slow in traffic, if they do improve the bridge or ever give a bus lane on the bridge, it would be a positive thing to do.

People don't like that much, to have to stand and wait for the bus to go down to Castro Valley BART to get onto the train, to wait for the train to go where they're going. They will load that parking lot. In fact, you don't have enough parking. Any BART lot is overused right now. They need to double or triple, three-story decks for the people to park their cars. They will bring their car down. There is a certain amount of traffic through it, but not enough to warrant all the money--many of these buses are running all day with two people, three people that go in and out of the BART stations. That part is not economic, and you're really just wearing your buses out for nothing.

McCreery: I wonder, all those years that you worked in maintenance, did you have much chance to compare what other local bus districts were doing? We talked about Santa Clara.

Johnson: Certainly. Oh, many, many times.

McCreery: With organizations?

Johnson: Oh, yes, APTA [American Public Transit Association]. We would attend the nationals in whatever cities they were at, and we could listen to what the newest equipment was. But you learn more about the nuts and bolts of it after the sessions were over. You just go sit at the dinner table or go sit at the bar and listen, and you can learn an awful lot.

The California federation--I gave presentations at that Caltrans thing. They would meet here at least once a year in the state of California. You could meet with all the other maintenance managers and compare notes, which is very interesting. You meet face to face, and you find out that you're not alone, and you can get the numbers of how many people they have per bus and things like that. It's interesting to compare notes. Very interesting.

McCreery: As you say, you learn a lot informally.

Johnson: You learn more informally than you do formally. There are a lot of things that can't be said formally. It's politically off the wall. Some things you cannot say. So you don't say them. I guess that's the way the world turns.

Using Computers in Technical Services; Management Philosophy

McCreery: I told you I wanted to talk a little bit about how you incorporated computers into your tech services area, your maintenance work.

Johnson: Yes. Well, computers came in. We tried several computer programs before. Transman was the one--early on, early on, with Transman. That goes way back. That goes before I was even a maintenance manager. That was where the service employees would just stick a card in, and it would automatically give you the fuel that was dispensed, engine oil, transmission, so and so. And that thing was a complete failure. It never worked, so we threw that one out. Of course, that was a learning curve we had to go [through]. They eventually end up--now they'll fuel, and it'll be logged automatically with the new fuel pumps and the new system they have going in. That's all computerized now at the fuel islands.

The main information data was out of a computer--the mainframe was in Central Maintenance, down on the lower floor, nice and--well, it's cool there if it's shut down, but it's warm there, and all the divisions--each clerk and each foreman has a terminal that would feed in and receive from that mainframe. It was slow, but it was efficient.

McCreery: Tell me specifically what kind of information you kept on that mainframe.

Johnson: Every bus from the day it came in, every repair that was done. If you went to the fuel section in the mainframe, it would give you every day how much fuel went in it, engine oil, things like that. If you had access to--the other end of it would be the purchasing department with the pricing. You could get the part number, and all the AC Transit parts--we have our own computer numbers, but it's a six-digit number, which is maybe bad because it limits you to 100,000.

So we have the in-house number as well as the manufacturer's part number for each piece. Therefore you can look up on the computer right now, and you can see which

division has that part and how many they have of each piece. All you need is a number to deal with. If you have the number, you're in fat city. No number, you're dead. You can't find a thing. But parts and pricing, which was very important to us--when we did all the warranty submissions, we needed that.

McCreery: Now, who would enter all this data in the mainframe?

Johnson: Various clerks at the division are supposed to enter it, and here again, it is the garbage in, garbage out syndrome, and we had a lot of wrong things that were put in. We had a lot of inaccurate, off-the-wall things. Any system will work. Manual will work. Computers will work. If you have the right people, people who care. You need people that care about what they're doing.

McCreery: Just so I can compare, how did you keep the records before they were computerized?

Johnson: We kept it downtown, on a database. We submitted a daily fuel report. Every bus was listed, with how much fuel it consumed. The transportation department would submit how many miles it accrued during the day, and it would have to have breaks in it if it was pulled out of service for one reason or another. Normally they would have a fixed item--a fixed run would be so many miles, so everything was done by exception.

As it turned out, our own operators' payroll is payroll by exception. They're paid so many hours unless there is an exception noted. Maintenance is still how many hours did you put in, how many doing this and this, this, this. Clerical is on payroll by exception right now. They know they're going to put forty hours in, and that's it, and they're going to get paid for it, unless they put in a separate exception sheet for differences: holiday, sick pay, blah, blah, blah.

So we had that computerized. Currently they pretty much have PCs at every unit instead of just working the data bank. Now, the PCs--they are coming out with beautiful reports every month. What good they are, I don't know. But they've got graphs with pies; they've got shapes, they've got forms; they've got all kinds of wonderful things, and they look good, and I guess they make a wonderful presentation.

Our paperless society is a misnomer. We use about eight times more paper now than we did before the advent of the computer. It is not a paperless society. [laughter] The PCs are at each station. I am not that proficient in computers. I did have, wonderfully, two complete days of word processing, so I can type my own letters and do my own

McCreery: So you found a place for them and put them to work?

Johnson: Oh, yes. Oh, no problem, no problem. Some in particular--Mr. Harold Ratcliff--he was a superintendent, and they didn't like him. Harold would stay after hours. I finally got him to put his hands behind his back so he would tell a man how to tune an engine. If the man was willing to work, he would stand there with him until midnight if need be. They didn't like him. They didn't like him one bit because he was a working fool. I had him. He took early retirement. When I retired, he said, "No more," and he left. He's inspecting buses for Los Angeles right now in Anniston, Alabama.

The people that expect a decent product at AC Transit also inspect with that thought, on the property, when you're back at the manufacturer's level. "I don't like this. This isn't correct. You've got to realign this and make it so it doesn't hit there, and make it better." And this is the type of person who makes it work.

McCreery: I wonder, now, thinking about the fact that you had this career of more than fifty years with essentially the same company, even though it changed in many ways, who were the people that were most influential to you in that career?

Johnson: I'd say one of the ones that I watched was Mr. [Anthony] Lucchesi, when he was maintenance manager, and another one that temporized Lucchesi's thinking and made it even more human was a Mr. Vince McCarthy. He was the foreman that I relieved. When he retired, I got into his position. Mr. Brooks Rice, first maintenance manager at AC Transit. I admired many people. I worked with many people. But I'm sort of a loner. Some people I liked, if they were on AC Transit's side. The others were just there for their own personal ego, I really didn't care for them, and therefore I didn't associate that much [with them]. It's hard to say.

McCreery: But it's fair to say you're a company man?

Johnson: I think yes, a company man. But Lucchesi tempered me. One day--because I used to run around--people never knew where I was at!--so one day he called me in the office, and he sat me down. "Now, just stay there." And he went about his business. After a while, he came back, and he said, "You just stay there." He went back about his business, and then he came back. "Goddamn it, Frank," he says, "if you can't come in here and have a conference for a half an hour without worrying about that shop, you haven't done your job. You haven't done your job. You've got to better delegate." In other words, you better have somebody trained.

correspondence. I was pretty good at that, but one day I looked around and I said, I've got a union clerk, and I've got a non-union clerk sitting there. I don't need to do my own processing. So I gave them stuff to do. So I'm not that proficient at it. I'm not afraid of it, but it's just the way the world worked.

McCreery: Now, how did computers change the actual maintenance work, if at all?

Johnson: They tended to generate preventative maintenance programs. The computer is just like BART: If it works, it's wonderful; but if the computer is down, you're dead, and your people would sit. So I don't know if you were that much better off or not. We had a beautiful system, a flawless system going before the computer. Maybe I'm a little bit biased about it because we did have really a very complete system.

We kept track of the fuel. We could give you the cost per mile of every vehicle from downtown, from their base down there, without a computer. At each division, we knew exactly what we had, every man. I knew every man by name. I knew every piece we had going, every bus by number. You knew the characteristics of every one. So manually, we had a good system. We couldn't generate the beautiful, colorful pies with the numbers and the percentages, but we could jolly well tell you what the cost for your heating system is, the cost per engine, cost per transmission, cost per any piece that you wanted to know. We could give you--and it would be accurate, and not too dependent on somebody making a mistake, hitting the wrong key.

McCreery: As you say, it depends on the humans running it, doesn't it?

Johnson: Yes, all the way. And I think any firm, be it a public agency or be it a private operating-for-profit agency, it comes out the same. It's the people that make or break you.

McCreery: Now, you said you were lucky in getting a lot of employees in your new tech services unit that weren't wanted elsewhere.

Johnson: Exactly.

McCreery: Did you continue to have enough good people to do what you wanted in those ten years?

Johnson: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, yeah. The people that the employees don't like are reasonably dedicated. [laughter] Yes.

Oh, this goes back to military, where you used to always have three, have three deep. In case you got killed, somebody else would take over, somebody blah, blah, blah. But he said, "No, if you can't sit here for a half hour, you haven't done your job. You think you've done your job, but you haven't." That was a good education.

Vince McCarthy was also a very human person. When mechanics would bust their butt to get your job out on time, they would come over and sign off the card, "Well, what's the next job?" Well, you find some minimal place at the other end of the yard to go check. This man has done his work. "You know, your toolbox looks awful dirty there. You should really get your toolbox squared away." And it puts a human piece to it. People would kill themselves for him. And I found that out. So I tried to take a little of that philosophy both ways.

I guess if you ask about people that influenced me, those two did. Lucchesi, from watching him, because he was a big BS-er. Oh, God, he would BS the people. He would lie through his teeth. He'd do anything to make it happen. [laughter] But that's okay. He was a superintendent at East Oakland when Mr. Everett Towers was a superintendent at Emeryville. I was under Towers for years. Mr. Towers was a very staunch--he looked like a typical Englishman. He would always show up right before quitting time and stand there, like the Maytag man, to make sure everybody worked up till when the whistle blew. But he was okay.

But Mr. Towers used to come down after--as a superintendent, he would be back on the premise. After dinner he would come down. Sometimes he'd come at midnight. Come at any time. It was good to do that, not that you're going to catch anybody, but it gave the foremen who were responsible for that shift--it gave the foremen credibility. They would always say, "Well, come on, you guys, we've got to get this fleet done. It's got to be clean; it's got to be done. We will get it over with, and you guys better get it done because that SOB Johnson is going to be down here kicking butt if you don't."

So if you always show up once in a while at all these off hours, different times, different places, it gave credibility to your foremen. It made the whole system work better. Not that you're going to do anything. Well, you see some goddamn thing, something horrible. You pull in adjacent to the thing and you see stupid people--sometimes I couldn't take it. They would get out of a bus they're fueling and go over and sit down right there in the fuel island and three of them will light up a cigarette. At that point, I get mad, and I come in and shut it down.

You see all kinds of things that shouldn't happen. It never hurts to--you get what you inspect. That's all you get. This goes through the whole shop. If you sit up in your office, things aren't going to happen, but if you come around and pay attention to the man that's rebuilding the compressor--"What's happening? What kind of parts are you receiving?" Show interest in the man who rebuilds the compressor.

Same thing with the man that rebuilds the alternators, and the same thing with the guy on the transmissions. They are people who need their own ego fed, if you will, about the job they're doing. It has to be important. It's got to be an important job. And it is. It's very important. That transmission's got to be perfect. So you try to work with them as far as what lubricants. Can we improve the lubricants? Can we improve the parts source we're getting things from? How else can we do this? Do we need a better dyno [dynamometer] over there to test it before we put it on the road?

You don't manage from that office. You think you do. To me, that's a fallacy of the computer. The computer demands so much time that pretty soon you lose the vision of the little man down in the shop, who you are so dependent on to get the information to put into that computer. Too many of them spend too much time in front of the computer. My opinion.

We have some wonderful computers on the buses today. The engines are all computerized. You can sit there with a computer reader, and you can change the RPMs on it. You can adjust the idle without even touching the engine. You can sit there and look at--see if one cylinder is missing, which one is missing, and you can diagnose. It's a wonderful system they have in there.

They have a nice computer on the transmissions now, too. It'll control the shift level, when they do actually shift, when it grabs one gear and releases the other one. You have to synchronize that so the two gears aren't in at the same time or they'll self destruct. But they have computers on that.

Now computers actually interface. They talk to each other, the engine and transmission ones will, as to what the power needs are. Do we shift down? "Hello, Mr. Engine. Do I do it now?" "No, don't do it yet." They talk to each other, I think, I've been told. I never heard 'em talk, but I understand they talk to each other!

Used in its correct place and for the correct reasons, you can't beat it. You cannot beat it. You cannot keep track otherwise. I don't think you could keep track of the payroll

if you didn't have a computer in there to keep track of it, and all the different innuendos that we have on today's market. The computer still must be treated as a tool and not a god. Maybe that's the difference. But I won't look up to it as a god. "I know things worked without you, Mr. Computer. I know they could do it again."

And when the computer does go down, you're really down. I visited the General Motors parts plant back in Michigan, Detroit, there, on one of the displays they had. They had a computerized picker that would go right down all the different aisles and different levels and pick the parts that are ordered by the different agencies, automatically put them on a pallet, and it'll all be palletized and gone. Unfortunately, the day that the guy took us through--we were from all different transit agencies; we were from Sacramento, San Francisco, all over, and we were all back there on this tour--and unfortunately, the computer was down, so here, 200 people are sitting back and doing nothing while the computer thinks about it. [laughter] Hello! It's a wonderful tool, but it's not God.

McCreery: Well, tell me about some of the people who came along behind you and ultimately took over this tech services area.

Johnson: One of them was Stuart Thompson. He came because he couldn't get along with anybody on different shifts. He computerized--because he is a computer nut--he computerized a lot of the items there and got it going. We were down to three people when I left. I think they've got it up to maybe six people now. But they don't write their own contracts now; they try to piggyback on other people's contracts to get their buses.

What they're doing with the warranty status, I don't know. Where they're at, I'm not really sure. I don't check back that much. I don't check back that much. I figure, I've done my thing. I'm gonna leave it be. I've gone back sometimes to say hello. It was sort of family. That part's okay. But what they're doing, what's actually happening--they still have new buses. They're going to have new problems. This is part of the world. They've had to do some major refits on different parts of equipment, NABI included. I'm really not sure.

McCreery: Okay. Any regrets?

Johnson: No. None. No regrets. [laughter]

McCreery: Well, congratulations! It's nice to be able to say that.

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McCreery: We were just finishing up, talking about your last ten years or so during the tech services area and all the ups and downs with computers and so on. You know, I just got to thinking about the fact that your father had this long career in transit also.

Johnson: He was basically a motorman.

McCreery: Yes, he was an operator and in a different line of the work.

Johnson: Certainly.

McCreery: But I just wonder what he would have thought of you having fifty-five years in the company?

Johnson: I have no idea. He'd probably say I was foolish to stay so long. [laughter]

McCreery: That's quite a family commitment you made between the two of you.

Johnson: It just ended up that way. You know from the beginning, why I went to work there, and it just seemed to work that way. It could have went any number of other directions, but this just happened to do it that way.

McCreery: I'm interested that you have characterized AC Transit and also the Key System as being like a family. You mentioned that a few different times. Of course, that's a concept we're kind of losing today, but perhaps it was more common then.

Johnson: It was more common, when you were basically promoting from within, within your own family and people--here again, to make the judgment calls--it's hard to legally judge which ones are more competent than others. You'll always be taken to court and beaten by this one or that one. We've had many, many come in with all kinds of paper from colleges and what have you. I've seen all kinds of paper that really was sort of worthless, especially from foreign countries. I've had them come in and apply as mechanics with paper from the Orient or the Philippines or things like that. The personnel that you ask to do a job, they couldn't even perform it, even if they had the paper.

Now, I know that downtown, in their research and planning and any number of other management jobs downtown--a lot of it is based on paper. Whether they're competent or

not, I don't know. I'm not there to judge that. I'm just looking from the maintenance point of view. I've got enough trouble with that.

McCreery: Now, I wonder, do you know much about the apprentice program they have again now in the maintenance area? When did that start?

Johnson: It started about a year after I was into the tech services. Through the years, we were trying to get people to get some kind of exposure to the diesel engine part of it, and that you could get at either College of Alameda or at the regional center in Hayward here. But here again, the diesel engine--it's wonderful to know, but it is such a small part of the bus in reality. I know, "It's the biggest and noisiest and the most expensive." No, it isn't.

You know, a wheelchair lift costs as much as an engine. The wheelchair lift. It costs about a thousand dollars more than that engine. And that's a beautiful engine. A lot of engineering. It does a lot of things. But the wheelchair lift costs more. It doesn't matter.

But the running gear of the bus and the will to see it through and fix it is really more important. You can pass all the tests you want in the world about the engine. You can know what the firing pressure is and what the compression ratios are and what all the other things are supposed to be and the timing devices, but the adjustment of the doors--the door cylinder is really what they call it, a door engine, but it's an air cylinder--that the patrons come in and out of is just as important as the engine. The steering part of the bus and especially the brake system is far more important.

So the apprentice program included things like the running gear and the brake systems and things like that. They incorporated a lot of that into the apprentice program. The apprentice program will work, people can pass all the tests they want, and you're back to will: if people care. Some people will pass the apprentice program; then all of a sudden a bus comes in that needs to be swept, and they say, "Oh, that's not my job," so they won't do it. Here again, you've got to have people that want to make the system work. It's so important. You can never wander too far from that little narrow lane, about wanting it to work. You can be the smartest person at work. You aren't worth a damn to me if you won't do what I ask you to do. [laughter]

But it has worked wonders in weeding out the wannabes and the dreamers or those that really--I tried to get--I tried initially, because I had so many problems early on in our hiring practice. I tried to get them to hire from Laney College down in Oakland. There we would get minorities. We would get not just African Americans, we would get

Mexicans, we would get everything. To graduate from Laney, they would have had to establish an attendance habit, of showing up. We could never get that through a lot of these people's head, that you've got to show up to get paid, and you aren't worth a darn to us how smart you are if you don't show up. [laughter] Right now, even today, on the union contract they have an attendance program, where if you have perfect attendance, you get close to two grand a year, just for showing up. Yes. That is bad.

So [the personnel department] didn't see fit to go down to Laney College. I tried to get them to hire--if you needed people for the metal shop or welding shop. They've got out here at Chabot College a tremendous metallurgy program. Graduates of that are worth hiring. I learned that when I was taking management training down there. I used to go down to the metallurgy department. They have terrific--but the personnel department never saw fit to hire there. I thought that would be the place to do it.

Other people do. They go into Chabot College. If they need a welder, they'll put a notice on the board with their name and their telephone number, and "Call me." They [at AC] could never see fit to do that. But yet they claim to have an outreach program, and they'll have--whatever. They ought to get people that care.

McCreery: It sounds like you had a lot of new ideas, though, that you tried out.

Johnson: Oh, I tried to instill some ideas, yes. I tried to invoke my ideas or whatever. But the more you go about in the outside world--see, AC Transit and our family is one little great enclave, and sometimes you get tied up in that, and you don't see the bigger picture. But if you do expose yourself to evening activities elsewhere, you find out that you're not alone. Everybody else has these problems. How did they solve them? They do this, this, and this. And it comes out that we have the same problems as Safeway [grocery store], the post office, you name it. They all have the same issues. You have to continually educate yourself. People that don't do that, they get in their own little rut and it's a shame.

McCreery: Well, who replaced you, or were you irreplaceable?

Johnson: I think they hired a man--Bob Bithell is in charge of that department now. He came from Detroit Diesel, and he hired some others from Detroit Diesel to come in now. I think they've got maybe six people doing what the three of us used to do.

McCreery: From the outside, mostly?

Johnson: Yes, yes, yes. But they'll [pause]--no comment.

McCreery: And you said you go visit once in a while, but you're not too involved anymore?

Johnson: No, no, no, no, no. I'm not involved anymore.

McCreery: I can understand that.

Sailing Hobby

McCreery: Now, I hear you spend your time sailing?

Johnson: I like to sail.

McCreery: Let's talk about that for a minute.

Johnson: Sure. Not much to say there.

McCreery: Well, I'm interested because you were in the navy submarines. I gather some people who go through that experience don't exactly seek out the water afterwards. Is that unusual?

Johnson: I guess I don't know too many other submariners that have boats, but some do. I visited New London, Connecticut, where the main sub base used to be, and they have a yacht club there. They've got some sailors out of there, mostly officers. I just had a yen for that. Some people like to bowl, some people like to play pool, some people like to hunt and fish; I just like to sail.

McCreery: How long have you had your own boat?

Johnson: Oh, I guess thirty years. Yes, yes. I've had different boats. This boat, I've had twenty years now. I had another boat for ten years. I love to race. Yes. I love to race. We race South Bay, south of the bridge here. We have about six yacht clubs that race together. Sometimes we win; sometimes we don't. But to maintain a level of racing, you have to have a young crew, and this keeps you young, too. It keeps you young. You hear new ideas, and you become completely--it just renews your day.

McCreery: Which club are you?

Johnson: I'm with Spinnaker Yacht Club and also belong to Coyote Point Yacht Club. I belong to two of them. Spinnaker doesn't race enough, but Coyote does race that much. And I also race with SBYRA [South Bay Yacht Racing Association].

McCreery: Now, what else do you do with your retirement?

Johnson: Well, so far I've been just doing things that a grandfather would do and what a husband would do and what a homeowner would do, but I haven't had that much time. I've been doing a lot of work with that Los Angeles group, with their buses. I did a lot of time with that.

McCreery: You're doing a lot of consulting. Let's just hear a little bit about that.

Johnson: Well, I did some of that directly with Los Angeles, but here again, they have restrictions on what they can do, so I was working as an individual. I was back in Hungary, inspecting their buses and their processing, what have you, back there. Then they were told they couldn't hire individually like that because it was against affirmative action policies, which is--whatever, so they hired another firm to do the inspection.

So the firm hired me, but I ended up doing the Anniston inspection. I was doing that with three other men back there in Anniston, Alabama. One of them happened to be this Harold Ratcliff, who retired from AC Transit when I left. So I was back there.

But then they've got to increase this. They were buying so many buses that they need us to work three weeks and be off one week, and I thought, uh-uh, life's too short for that. So I resigned from that. I've resigned for a month. I've been home for a month, so I really haven't retired that much, if you will. [laughter]

McCreery: We'll see if it lasts.

Johnson: Oh, yes! It'll last. I told them if they have a one-week stint or whatever they want to do, it's fine with me, but not three weeks on and one off. It's too much.

Thoughts on Diversity and Affirmative Action

McCreery: Is there anything else I should have asked you about the district?

Johnson: Well, one thing I think we missed. I had a very hard time with affirmative action and what they did to us. I had my own method of affirmative action, which I believe in. I believe in promoting people if they perform. I don't believe in promoting them if they don't perform.

When I was a mechanic, I had a counterpart in East Oakland, whose name was also Johnson, Herman Johnson. In fact, Herman Johnson and his wife, and my wife and I--we went to AC Transit functions, so the four of us would sit together. They called us salt and pepper. Fine. Whatever. But he and I got along very well.

In fact, he was a working fool. He could change a transmission faster than I could. I could do electrical faster than he could. We were sort of equal. When I became a superintendent in East Oakland, I made him a foreman. He couldn't read or write that well, although he ran a garage on the side, up on East Fourteenth Street, training young aspirants to be mechanics, auto mechanics. He was a good mechanic in his own right, but he demanded eight hours' work for eight hours' pay, and he had some problems there. I gave him a clerk. I said, "You just tell him what you want written down, and we'll do it."

When I became maintenance manager, I made him a superintendent. I gave him Emeryville Division. He was condemned, ostracized, hurt by his own people. They smashed a sledge hammer through his windshield. They flattened all four tires. They just generally raised hell with him. He finally [was given] early retirement, had a brain tumor, and died. An absolute crime. They called him all wrong names, that "Oreo" bit and all the other crap. He was just trying to become a good manager. He was a good person, a real good person.

I had a lot of stories, I guess. A lot of bad people were brought in on this affirmative action guise, to us, that we were never allowed to filter through. A lot of them were mean, threatening. One would go behind a man's house in Alameda. He was just a mechanic, and he would stalk the place. We called the cops. We did everything in the world, and AC Transit would not take action.

Mr. Keith Steckley was threatened, another man in East Oakland, so many times. Some of that stuff was bad.

I believe in promoting them, and we had some very good ones. I believe in doing that. But if you're going to have a program like that, you've got to be able to screen and have the right to do it without being put on trial for every adverse entry you enter against a person. In that respect, if I have anything negative to say about it, it made an Archie Bunker out of me, which was horrible, because I didn't go in that way. I was never brought up that way. But it'll make an Archie Bunker out of you, and that's wrong. I condemn them for that. They did hurt Herman real bad.

The same group did the same thing to Ratcliff's car when he was a superintendent there. They would get a hold of his car and "take care of it." Or spray paint, do something, just ruin it. They did things to him; they did things to Herman. There was a bad group in there for a long time.

Now, one by one they seem to either grow up and become aware of the good job they have. Some become that way. They actually, after ten years, twelve years, they would come into you and say, "I realize I've been a fool, haven't I?" "Yes, you've been a fool." Some will come in and talk to you, because they know they can talk to you. I mean, they could talk to me, and it would stay there. They would come in and say, "I've been a fool, haven't I?" "Yes."

Others, one by one, either the drugs would get 'em or the cops would get 'em or they'll end up just leaving of their own--some are still with us out there. But as they mature, when they get out of the twenties, maybe they get into forty, forty-five years old; then they become more normal, I guess, what I would consider normal. But there was a real hard time for quite a few years there with the group that they hired, the unemployables. We sure had 'em. We sure had 'em.

McCreery: Thank you for telling me that. Was there any good side to that program, in your view?

Johnson: No, because from the maintenance point of view, it was not a good thing. They made you promote people who shouldn't have been promoted. I even had a minority maintenance manager out of Sacramento come down to sit in judgment. I would stay out of it, neutral. And he was African [American] himself, and he would tell you which ones were wrong, and the personnel department would overrule that. They would just make someone a foreman anyway. Didn't matter. They're going to have a quota; they're going to do--

although “we don’t have quotas”--they’re going to have a quota, and they will have a quota. Whatever.

Some that were not of Herman Johnson’s thinking would actually run a welfare department. They would pay all the overtime they wanted, and anybody could come in and go to sleep if they wanted, and he would pay them, just to run the welfare department. That was going on. It may still be going on. No, I don’t think it’s going on now. It should have been stopped.

We were so integrated to begin with that it was a crime to change the policy, because it was all based on performance and not on color and not on creed. I guess the diversity occurred during World War II. Before World War II, there was so much Italian, heavy Italian in the rail as well as in the rubber. That’s what Lucchesi was part of, was part of the old Italian clique.

I give them credit. The old Italians came over here, none of them college degreed. They built the whole Key System. All those tracks you see--if you see pictures of all those tracks running from Oakland to Berkeley, they were all put down by these men who were just experienced rail layers from Italy, and they did it with no calculators, no computers. It was all built. They built the whole thing. So I give them credit. They had a lot of good things going.

There was a lot of Italian and I guess some diversity from that. But then World War II came, and they did have to hire anybody they could get, so we had everything going, and when I came out of the military, we did have a very diverse group, very diverse. To stand there at the court and allow the consent decree to go through with our department was a crime, I thought. They were obligated to make X amount, a foreman.

We offered blacks foremen’s jobs. It used to be, to be a foreman, you had to be a relief foreman first. In other words, you’d have Mondays and Tuesdays or Wednesdays and Thursdays, anything you want off; but you have to be there for the weekend. Well, the blacks wouldn’t do that. They don’t want to miss Friday night. I saw them refuse. They refused it.

Well, now, when the consent decree came through, the powers that be come down and they look and say, “Oh, you don’t have any black foremen.” “Well, no, they all refused!” “Oh, no, no, you’ve done something wrong. You’re guilty.” So we were guilty because we didn’t have black foremen, but we weren’t guilty. It was not our doing. We had some

that were smart, and--we had a couple that we were trying to make foremen. One of them--he quit. He went into the county sheriff's department. Another one quit and went into Oakland someplace, Port of Oakland. We had others we were trying to make foremen. They didn't want it, because they had to give up their weekends.

Affirmative action. I don't buy it. We tried with women, to make mechanics out of them, but they're not heavy-duty mechanics. Good mechanics, maybe, in a car. Some are good there. But they're not physically--it's illegal to have them do half the things the men do in a heavy-duty mechanic role. It's a different deal. It's illegal. "Oh, you've got to make accommodations. You've got to have this. You've got to have that." Hello. It's not fair.

Go to any outside shop. Go to any truck depot out here, and take a look at who's working there, where free enterprise is involved and not public money. Go into any truck shop. Just look, and you'll see what the makeup is. I've got nothing against women. I love 'em. They make good crew on the boat, really wonderful. We have fun. Yes. Half my crew is generally women. Guys bring their wives along. The wives are better than they are. [laughter] Truly. I mean that. They're more intense. You give them the wheel--they're very intense. [laughter] There's nothing wrong with that, nothing wrong with that.

McCreery: Your point is that in some settings it doesn't make sense [to employ women]?

Johnson: No, no, it doesn't, because you have laws about lifting, which is logical. We have tried to bring in more different adapters and jigs and jacks and things to accommodate different things for, like, brake drum changing and transmission changing, but for a person to "wrestle" these things that you have there, it's far better to have a male do it than a female.

Monterey Transit is pretty good. They do their own tires, whereas we contract it out to low bidders, Firestone, Goodyear, whoever. So when you go to work for Monterey Transit, you're stuck with changing the wheels and changing the tires. Well, this sort of weeds out those that can do and those that can't do, right in the beginning. From there, you go into the levels of heavy-duty mechanic elsewhere. Whether that's been ruled illegal by now, by some judge down there, I have no idea. But that's the way it used to be.

McCreery: They tell me, Frank Johnson, that if you get cut, you sprout buses from your veins instead of blood.

Johnson: I've heard that! [laughter]

McCreery: Is it true?

Johnson: No, no, I just bleed. [laughter] I just bleed. No, I just bleed, just bleed plain old blood.

McCreery: Well, you see why I had to ask?

Johnson: Yeah. Somebody told you that. Somebody told you that. I don't know who. Somebody told you that. But, no, I've been accused of that.

McCreery: Okay. Well, thank you for taking all this time to talk with me about your career.

Johnson: You're very welcome. You're very welcome. It wakes up a few old memories and what have you. I'll be happy to share the few things I did collect. You can scan through them and bring them back at your leisure.

McCreery: Okay. Thank you.

Johnson: Because I had them in my attic for two years now or something. Maybe three. I forget now. Some time, they've been up in the attic. Some of them are interesting. I'll explain some before you go.

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Laura McCreery

Laura McCreery is a senior interviewer in UC Berkeley's Regional Oral History Office, where she manages projects on California government and politics, public policy, and higher education. Since 1996 she also has done private oral history consulting, project management, and workshops for such clients as Reed College, the Society of California Archivists, Prytanean Alumnae, Inc., the Berkeley Historical Society, and the Novato History Museum. She holds a B.A. in Speech Communication from San Diego State University and an M.S. in Mass Communications from San Jose State University.

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